The Pāla Kingdom: Rethinking Lordship in Early Medieval North Eastern India

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To
Silvia

and

To
Marino

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Abstract

Often historians, conceiving the early 'state' as distinct from its 'society', project onto pre-modern social formations concepts meaningful only to the present, capitalist context. Categories such as society, economy and religion are anachronistically 'discovered' in the evidence and construed as separate entities. The debates then turn to the degree of political and administrative 'centralisation' of those early political formations. By examining available evidence, this dissertation seeks to reconceptualise the early medieval North Indian kingdom as a system of dynamic and interactive social relations. Combining both the Marxist concept of Mode of Production and a phenomenological approach the dissertation identifies the notion of lordship as the key category underpinning the polities of early medieval India. The early medieval Indian state was the total system of social relations constructed on and organised by agrarian relations of production.

The dissertation develops this argument in specific reference to the Pāla kingdom, while also analysing and comparing it with the Gupta 'empire'. In the early medieval period the latter in fact sets the pattern of social organisation. A system of multiple ownership of land shaped the agrarian structure of both the Pāla and Gupta polities. A different entitlement to ownership rights distinguished landlords, landowners and cultivators and constituted them in a hierarchy of agrarian, political and ideological ranks. Ownership rights were themselves 'apportioned' on the basis of a cosmo-moral order known as *dharma*. *Varṇadharma*, the order of social 'classes', functioned as the ideological template for social relations. It was this ideological construct which empowered the king as both the supreme proprietor of all land and the supreme protector of *dharma/varṇadharma*. In fact, neither the *varṇa* template nor the agrarian relations which it sustained could possibly exist outside a kingdom. The king's double relation of dependence on and 'supremacy' over *dharma* fashioned lordship in early medieval India.

The dissertation argues that the early medieval Indian state was a hierarchical chain of encompassing and encompassed lordships. By implication it makes little sense to speak of 'centralisation', 'decentralisation', 'bureaucratisation' and 'administration'. Lordship, at once an ideological, economic and political category, structured the *totality* of social relations. In the polity which emerged the reaches of the political and its contexts were far deeper and extended than in modern, capitalist social formations.

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Introduction

> With a sign of his gracefully moved eye-brows [Dharmapāla] installed the illustrious king of Kanyakubja, who readily was accepted by the Bhoja, Matsya, Madra, Kuru, Yadu, Yavana, Avanti, Gandhāra and Kira kings, bowing down respectfully with their diadems trembling, and for whom his own golden coronation jar was lifted up by the delighted elders of Pañchāla.[1]

This passage refers to the highest accomplishment of the Pāla dynasty, when Dharmapāla, the second in the line of succession and perhaps the greatest dynast of the family, installed the king of Kanyakubja, the old imperial capital of the North. The event took place at an imperial gathering (*darbar*) in the presence of many subordinate kings, which itself placed Dharmapāla at its head as the king of kings.

The scene is striking: at the height of his success Dharmapāla's agency is conspicuous by its absence. Indeed what Dharmapāla does is to gracefully move his eye-brows. Remaining action is transferred on to the lesser kings surrounding him. It is they who recognise the installation and bow down in prostration; it is the elders of Pañchāla who lift up the coronation jar. Dharmapāla is almost lost in the scene, yet it is his absence which makes the event majestic. What in appearance looks like a theatrical display, in reality was the most important political act in the creation of a polity. The gracefulness of Dharmapāla's movements, the respectful bowing down of kings and their trembling diadems together with the delight of the elders signify not some baroque, poetic embellishments, but the emergence of a new political reality. What had already been decided on the battlefield was now being acknowledged. That imperial gathering was the final articulation of the new hierarchy of power, the building of *dharma* embodied in Dharmapāla. It was within this new structure of power that every other authority had to negotiate its place. Loyalty and devotion, the 'emotional' manifestation of the new set of dialectic relationships, articulated political power on the basis of links of personal affiliation. Dharmapāla, the purest embodiment of authority and the guarantor of the new order, was now their final referent.

Although the western fascination with India has a long history, it significantly increased during the British colonial period. The knowledge that British officials gained from their actual presence on Indian soil supplanted the often fanciful accounts of

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[1] F. Kielhorn, "Khalimpur Plate of Dharmapaladeva," *Epigraphia Indica* (*EI*) IV (1896-97), p. 252, verse 12.

earlier travellers and came to constitute *the* knowledge of India, the hegemonic appropriation of India's otherness. Such a knowledge was in fact the theoretical reflection of a political reality which saw a colonial and foreign power become the self-appointed master of India. That the 'gracefully moved eye-brows' of Dharmapāla or the 'delight of the elders' were integral expressions of a political structure was not understood by early historians who, instead, condemned the actions of medieval agents to political insignificance.

The depoliticisation of Indian history and indeed the actual negation of history itself which that knowledge propounded, were certainly functional to British military and political expansion in India. However, underneath British colonial rationality lay the structure of a capitalist state expanding outside Britain and exporting to India its own political and economic models. Early British historians surreptitiously represented India as the land of mysticism and religion, in apparent opposition to the rational and pragmatic world of the West. However, I believe that what was construed as India's radical otherness resided less in the civilisational differential and more on the politico-economic divide. Early British historical narratives necessarily reflected the gradual absorption and submission of India's pre-capitalist system in its encounter with Britain's capitalist set-up.

When Indian nationalists began to write the history of India, things changed little. Although they gave the impression of radically changing colonialist historical narratives, in fact they merely reversed existing value judgements. The kind of capitalist world-ordering rationality imported by the British and embedded in the colonial structure was merely assumed by Indian historians and applied to India in positive rather than negative terms. Although born in Europe under specific historical conditions, what was passed on as western rationality was assumed to be temporally and spatially universal, almost an a-historical given. Abstraction was the main feature of this rationality, and an essentialised notion of the state was its highest embodiment. History was no longer the space of human endeavour but the battlefield of ideas and institutions with little or no relation to real historical human beings. And Dharmapāla's gracefully moving eye-brows continued to represent the farcical irrationality of the Asiatic 'theatre state'.

This dissertation is an attempt to rethink the polity in early medieval North and particularly North-eastern India as the articulation of a pre-capitalist, world-ordering rationality – the product of knowledges and practices devised by early medieval

Indians. The present study is thus an attempt to constitute India's 'otherness' not as an incomplete anticipation of 19th century European institutions and, by implication, an excuse for incorporation and submission, but as a 'self' in its own right.

However obvious this objective may appear, it must be stated from the outset that the early medieval state cannot be comprehended with modern, capitalist notions. The modern state may be defined as a set of publicly 'owned' institutions which maintain a set of abstract legal and formal categories – juridico-legal entities and their relations – formally separated from the realm of 'civil society', a place of association and market exchange, both individual and corporate.[2]

The above working definition, debatable as it may be, has the merit of drawing our attention to the basic dichotomy in modern political theory between the state and its civil society, the sites of two radically different sorts of powers. Unfortunately, what was and is the capitalist state has been elevated to the rank of a universal truism and converted abstractly into an evolutional necessity detached from any sort of historical determinant. To the extent which the early medieval Indian state is thus described and interpreted on the basis of capitalist notions, it is misrepresented as a lesser version of its capitalist model.

The dissertation thus proposes a rereading of early medieval material on the basis of pre-capitalist categories. The apparent dominance of religious notions in early medieval sources is not taken, as the orientalist narrative infers, to symbolise an a-political system of social relations or the engulfment of the state by its civil society. This dissertation will argue that in the early medieval context, that dominance reflected a social system where the compartmentalisation of knowledge in formal domains had not taken place. Furthermore, the lack of clearly defined religious, political and economic domains, did not insinuate the absence of political, religious and economic functions. In this respect the dissertation contends that the social formations of early medieval India organised themselves on a notion of politics whose extent and import were far wider than in modern and contemporary formations.

Refuting the anachronistic dichotomy of 'state' and 'society', the dissertation employs the notions of 'social formation' and 'polity' to pinpoint the totality of early medieval systems, in which politics, religion and economy do not exist as the specific competencies of either state or civil society but are instead the overlapping functions of one and the same reality. Obviously, the expression 'social formation' does not

[2] I am in debt to Daud Ali for this working definition of modern state.

correspond to 'civil society', since it is defined as the space of all social relations, political and extra-political alike. The same is to be said of the term 'polity' which is here employed in the same way. Attention is however drawn to the complexity of such polities. The lack of compartmentalised domains of social interaction does not result either in social fragmentation or in the impossibility of communal life. On the contrary, the dissertation maintains that the polities of early medieval India responded to and embodied a world-ordering rationality which informed and constrained all aspects of social and individual life. What we would today call 'religion' was what organised that world-ordering rationality and lordship was its operative category. Lordship was the notion which defined the masteries and competencies of Indian agents with cosmological and theological sanction. Such competencies, however, were translated immediately into and constituted by default politico-economic relationships among people.

To make sense of both the dominance of 'religion' and the notion of lordship it fashioned, this dissertation deploys the concept of mode of production as an effective analytical tool. It will thus be shown that in the world-ordering rationality of early medieval India, the economic and the political were not discarded as unimportant domains of social interaction, but that they were, on the contrary, social functions mediated by so called 'religious categories'. The hierarchy of ideological ranks provided for by 'religion' translated immediately into a hierarchy of agrarian relations and consequently into a hierarchy of political ranks. Lordship, a religious, economic and political category all at once, built the early medieval Indian state, not as a separate institution from society but as the totality of that society. At the core of the Indian world-ordering rationality, lordship fashioned early medieval kingdoms as unitary systems of social relations.

It is necessary at this point to warn the reader of an intrinsic and insoluble terminological ambiguity of this dissertation. This ambiguity is due to the conceptual impasse in dealing with pre-modern material with modern terms. Because of the particular constitution of early medieval polities, categories such as religion, economy and politics have to be re-signified so that they no longer correspond to the meanings inferred in their modern usage. Similarly and more importantly, although the dissertation often refers to medieval 'political' systems as 'polities' or 'social formations' with no administrative machinery, terms like 'state', 'office' and 'officer' are not

altogether dismissed. It is however clear that when used they do not and cannot simply refer to their contemporary notions.

Focusing on the Pāla kingdom of North-eastern India (c. 750-1200 AD), the dissertation uses available sources to offer both a critique of received historiography and a new conceptualisation of early medieval North and North-eastern Indian kingdoms. In fact a quasi-synoptical analysis of both the Pāla and Gupta social formations reveals great similarities in their patterns of economic, religious and political organisation. This allows us to postulate that starting from the Guptas a unitary pattern of social organisation developed throughout the early medieval North Indian period. The Pāla kingdom was characterised by a stronger political hold on the land, determined less by agrarian expansion and more by a process of political integration which saw the Pāla court continuously interacting with dispersed *loci* of political authority or principalities. The numerous officials appearing in Pāla inscriptions, far from being the depoliticised agents of a more or less centralised administration, were real political actors whose hierarchical status reflected and depended on their actual authority over a local territory and on their position within the Pāla court. In Pāla India and generally in early medieval North India, political authority stemmed from agrarian relations of production, constituted by a hierarchical chain of lordships with the king, the lord of the earth, at the top and the *kṣetrakaras*, the actual tillers of the soil, at the bottom. The picture which emerges is thus of a dynamic system were relative ranks were continuously bargained for through acts such as wars, marriages and religious donations which forged loyalties and dissipated enmities. Such dynamism, however, was always functional to political stability, i.e. it did not challenge class privilege.

The opening chapter of the dissertation deals specifically with historiography. It begins by arguing that most historians seem to yield to an abstract notion of the early medieval Indian state. The state is variously conceptualised but more often than not adheres to an essentialised and a-historical model, an institution among others, with no real context or history. The compartmentalisation of human practice eventually results in the dichotomy of state and society, which if meaningful in the modern context, has little if any applicability in the context of early medieval India. The last section of the chapter offers an alternative approach, which, starting from a comprehensive and unitary view of the early medieval Indian polity, employs the notion of lordship and the concept of Mode of Production for its 'articulation'.

The following three chapters, mainly built on a thorough study of epigraphic material, deal successively with economy, ideology and politics. These are, as I have stated, aspects or functions of the one and same historical reality or polity. The enquiry will clearly show that the economic, ideological and political structures of early medieval social formations were overlapping. Therefore, in the second chapter, an analysis of the kinds of land donated, immunities granted and sources of income conceded as they appear in both Pāla and Gupta inscriptions, gives an insight into how the agrarian structures of both the Pāla and Gupta polities looked. These comprised a hierarchical chain of landowners who had varying degrees of proprietary rights over land. The comprehensive entitlement of the king to all the land of his kingdom made him the landlord *par excellence*. Below him variously ranked lords had ownership rights over land, and below them again were variously ranked landowners. They in turn leased out the land to the actual cultivators. The *kṣettrakaras* (peasants) of Pāla inscriptions most likely did not pay any rent to the king but to their direct landowners, who in turn paid tribute to the king directly or to their local landlord.

To make sense of the king's ownership of all the land of his kingdom and at the same time of the conflicting claims of other agents to that same land, the third chapter attempts an analysis of the ideological and legal conditions of property in early medieval North India. Thus the concept of multiple ownership of land, introduced in the previous chapter, is further developed and analysed. A series of innate rights (*adhikāras*) entitled particular people to particular rights or masteries. The cosmo-moral order (*dharma*) of early medieval India organised the agrarian relations of production on the basis of a system (i.e. *varṇadharma*) which worked as a model for social relations. The king had a particular relationship with such a system so that while on the one hand he was king because of *dharma*, on the other *dharma* could not be conceived of without a king and outside a kingdom. Lordship was indeed fashioned by *dharma*, but the latter was itself dependent on the former.

Agrarian relations, modelled by the early medieval Indian cosmo-moral order, also governed political relations, the focus of chapter four. Lordship, defined as a fuller form of ownership, was in fact the basis for political rankings. On the metaphorical and heuristic line of graded ownership rights, the king had the highest entitlement and therefore he possessed the highest degree of lordship. Meanwhile, at the bottom of the same hierarchy, the *kṣettrakaras* had the least qualification of all and hence little or no ownership of land. *Daṇḍa* or coercion was what differentiated lordship from simple

ownership and constituted what in modern terms is called the realm of 'political relations'. *Daṇḍa* as such was not a superstructural adjunct, but the internal constituent of ownership relations. For this reason, it is futile to think of the existence of an administrative and bureaucratic machine in early medieval polities, for the relationship between ruling elite and ruled people was direct, established through ownership relations. The so called 'officers' were therefore nothing but local lords who, during the early medieval period, were progressively transformed into courtiers. The importance of land in the definition of lordship and the process of political integration of local lords within the Pāla court explain the stronger political hold on the land enjoyed by the Pāla kings. This last chapter finally uses the Indian concept of *rājamaṇḍala*, the circle of kings, to qualify the political chain of lordships which constituted early medieval polities.

Four appendixes supplement the dissertation. The first offers a panoramic view of all the Pāla kings and their approximate dates. The second and third provide two maps with all the major geographic features dealt with in the text. The last appendix consists of a table detailing the major characteristics of all the Pāla royal charters.

CHAPTER ONE

The Early Medieval State in Historiography

1. Introduction

Indian historiography was born as political history. In fact the study of the state, its functioning, territorial extension and duration have always been central to historians' concerns. If this on the one hand was determined and conditioned by the particular colonial reality which the Indian sub-continent found itself in from the late 18th century onwards, it reflected on the other hand the entrenched idea that the greatness of a civilisation was measured by the kind of political structures it was able to produce. This kind of consciousness originated with the Reformation, was developed during the Enlightenment and received its highest formulation in Hegel's political philosophy.

The modern panorama of Indian historiography has changed considerably. Indian history is no longer merely political history. However, the cultural bias which perceives the state as the highest achievement of civilisation is far from being discarded. Despite the sophistication of their approaches, modern historical studies often continue to depend on an anachronistic notion of nation-state, as well as on an unchecked reference to modern political formations.

Before delving into the historiographic debate, however, we need, first of all, to introduce summarily the question of periodisation. British historiography from J. Mill onwards divided Indian history into Hindu, Muslim and British periods. This religion-based subdivision reflected both the Orientalist bias of a depoliticised Indian history and the belief that if change took place in India it was due to foreign invasions. Nationalist historians accepted Mill's periodisation, but imbued it with stronger communal overtones. Hindu, Muslim and British periods corresponded perfectly to Ancient, Medieval and Modern periods, where the Ancient signified the apex of Indian (i.e. Hindu) civilisation. From the 1950s, the influence of Marxist historiography begins to become apparent when the Indian history is tentatively reperiodised according to perceived structural changes in the historical process. 'Early historical' and 'early medieval' are thus introduced to capture notions of change. The early medieval, a sort of transitional period, indicates the centuries from the post-Gupta times to the Muslim conquest of the Northeast (6th-13th centuries). Unfortunately the question of periodisation remains today an unresolved one so that there is no consensus as to

when, why and how the ancient period ends and the medieval begins.[1]

In an attempt to organise the valuable aspects highlighted by different historians and in view of overcoming their shortcomings, the last section of the chapter briefly outlines the methodological and conceptual approaches I intend developing in this dissertation. While generally rooted in Marxist insights, the framework I propose rests on a reformulation of the concept of mode of production. The latter finds shape and content in the notion of lordship, a comprehensive category on which, I will argue, early medieval Indian social formations were established.

2. The early conceptualisations of the Indian state: the Orientalist and Nationalist debate

> The ability to account for the past entails the power to put it into the service of the present – and into the service of those who pronounce on what has happened in the past.[2]

From its inception in the late 18th century, Indian historiography was the direct product of British colonial domination. The early histories of India as R. Thapar lucidly puts it were "administrator's histories,"[3] and helped British civil servants fulfil their administrative functions. It is a known fact that the early works of those administrators turned scholars, generically known as Orientalists or Indologists, reflected a peculiar instance of European history and were the product of "a mutually supporting relationship between power and knowledge."[4]

Among Orientalist scholars two schools of thought can be identified: the Utilitarian and the Romantic or Idealist.[5] Despite their differing assessments of India as a whole, both depicted Indian ancient history as an unchanging reality, dominated by Hinduism and with caste as its centrepiece. Political relations did not enter the actual

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[1] On the question of periodisation see: R.S. Sharma, "Problem of Transition from Ancient to Medieval Indian History," *The Indian Historical Review* 1.1 (March 1974), pp. 1-9; B.D. Chattopadhyaya, "Introduction: The Making of Early Medieval India," B.D. Chattopadhyaya ed., *The Making of Early Medieval India* (Delhi, paperback 1997), pp. 1-37; R. Thapar, "Interpretations of Ancient Indian History," R. Thapar ed., *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations* (London, 1996), pp. 1-22.

[2] B.K. Smith, *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varna System and the Origins of Casts* (New York, 1994), p. 58.

[3] R. Thapar, *A History of India* (London, first published 1966, reprint 1990), p. 17.

[4] Gyan Prakash, "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* XXXII.2 (1990), p. 384.

[5] The Idealist or Romantic school is often identified with Orientalism proper while the Utilitarian school is often perceived as being distinctive. See Thapar, "Interpretations of Ancient Indian History," p. 4. I prefer to keep the different brands of thought under the same Orientalist heading simply because despite their different conclusions they all start out from the same epistemological framework.

reality of Indian civilisation, rather an excessive concern with spirituality inhibited India's political development. Whatever historical change occurred, it was the result of foreign influence and not of autochthonous forces. Significantly in the *History of British India*, one of the first important works published in 1817 by James Mill, Indian history is divided into three periods: the Hindu, the Muslim and the British. Caste was identified as the root cause of India's lack of historical dynamism and the religious hierarchy which structured Indian society was the reason for its inability to produce solid and lasting political institutions.

The state as perceived by those historians and as it was concretely being constructed by British colonialists, was thought to be unknown to Indian civilisation. Apart from the brief periods when the imperial rulers of the Mauryas or Guptas managed to overcome the intrinsic and divisive forces always at work in Indian history, India remained a confused amalgam of perpetually warring local principalities. Vincent Smith, in his widely circulated *The Early History of India* first published in 1904, introduced the period following the demise of Harṣa, with typical colonial bias and instrumentality:

> The three following chapters, which attempt to give an outline of the salient features in the bewildering annals of Indian petty states when left to their own devices for several centuries, may perhaps serve to give the reader a notion of what India always has been when released from the control of a supreme authority, and what she would be again, if the hand of the benevolent power which now safeguards her boundaries should be withdrawn.[6]

Generally speaking, early European historians of India did not acknowledge significant distinctions within the so called Hindu period. The criterion employed to judge the historical value of this and other periods was the presence or otherwise of empires. Thus the Mauryan and to a lesser extent the Gupta empires, were considered major political achievements. Unfortunately, however, these were deemed the exceptional and temporary realisations of remarkable personalities. The rule of Indian history was a grim and mysterious quiescence which eventually reabsorbed such experiments into its atavistic immobility. Again Vincent Smith's formulation at the beginning of his work renders this point well:

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[6] Vincent Smith, *The Early History of India* (Oxford, 4th edition 1924), p. 372.

> The complete political unity of India under the control of a paramount power, wielding unquestioned authority, is a thing of yesterday, barely a century old. The most notable of her rulers in the olden times cherished the ambition of universal Indian dominion, and severally attained it in a greater or less degree. Not one of them, however, attained it completely, and this failure involves a lack of unity in political history...[7]

Political history, if there was one, was limited to dynastic chronology, the listing of names belonging to this or that reigning family. Such narratives highlighted the intrinsic deficiencies of the Indian system and justified the benevolent presence of the colonial power. What India did not succeed in accomplishing during its long history would be realised and accomplished by British intervention. Nothing new, indeed: the British conquest was only the last of a long series of invasions which started with the Aryans and was followed by the Greeks and Muslims, to name but a few. Conquerability was in fact India's destiny.[8]

More specifically, the pre-colonial state was conceptualised according to the theory of Oriental Despotism. This theory was basically founded on accounts of travellers and ambassadors which visited India during the pre-British period. These accounts often referred to the lack of private property in land, to the self sufficiency of village economies and to the luxuries of the Indian courts. The profligacy of Indian monarchs was thus the result of their absolute ownership of the land and of the immense resources they extracted from their peasant-tenants.[9] The Indian despot however did not succeed in creating a centralised form of government. His despotism was basically a degenerated form of arbitrary power, enmeshed with superstitions and religious beliefs, divorced from more formal legal or scientific forms of administration. The point therefore was that the Indian system was radically irrational! And this irrationality was due to the overwhelming prestige and power that the priestly class wielded. A contradiction may here be noted. Although the Indian monarch was a despot his actual power was very limited. Mill thus writes that the king was little more than an instrument in the hands of the Brahmans. He performed the laborious task of government, and sustained the responsibility, while they chiefly possessed the power.[10]

The Oriental Despotism theory found in Marx a willing supporter. On the basis of information "supplied by administrators and other officers employed by the British

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[7] *Ibid.*, p. 5.
[8] R. Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 54-56.
[9] R. Thapar, "Ideology and the Interpretation of Early Indian History," R. Thapar ed., *Interpreting Early India* (Delhi, 1992), pp. 6-7.
[10] J. Mill, *Of the Hindus*, quoted in Inden, *Imagining India*, p. 171.

India government and the Parliamentary Reports,"[11] he outlined, without further elaboration, a model for interpreting the socio-economic structure of Asian societies: the Asiatic Mode of Production. This model once again stressed the unchanging nature of Indian society, the lack of privately owned land and conversely its state ownership. The exploitation of isolated and self sufficient village communities, being completely subjugated by state power, enabled the despotic Indian ruler to live in luxury.

Both Oriental Despotism and the Asiatic Mode of Production were apparently stages of historical development which all Asiatic civilisations underwent. However, the Indian civilisation was intrinsically unable of movement and hence its stagnated character. The cultural background of these early historians was undoubtedly Hegel's philosophy of history. The Hegelian rationalisation of world history in the triadic movement of thesis, antithesis and synthesis apportioned to India the 'symbolic' or 'imagination' stage, which, if rational in its own right, was superseded by successive and more rational phases, i.e. the classical (Greece) and the modern (Romantic).[12] More specifically, Indian subjectivity (i.e. 'imagination') had been unable to objectify itself as a consciousness distinct from Nature. Consequently, the lack of the antithesis prevented the rational synthesis in a Spirit both conscious of its unity as well as diversity. What was central in India was the unmediated consciousness of a natural differentiation which never reached the differentiated synthesis of conscious unity. Hegel thus concluded that "Hindoo political existence presents us with a people, *but no state.*"[13] And to be sure, the natural differentiation Hegel talked about was represented by the caste system. Eventually, the various characterisations of European historians – the lack of political unity, the oriental despotism together with its ideological correlate, the Asiatic Mode of Production, the king's divinity, the villages' self-sufficiency, the overall irrationality of the system – were linked to that metaphysical and a-historical entity called the caste system. The latter was depoliticised in its valence and often constructed as a religious essence: "caste, not the state, was what held [...] village communities together."[14]

From the second half of the 19th century, Indian scholars started the study of Indian history, but it was only in the first half of the 20th century that they began to approach Indian ancient history in a clearly different way from the hegemonic British

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[11] Thapar, "Interpretations of Ancient Indian History," p. 6.
[12] Inden, *Imagining India*, pp. 70-71.
[13] Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 71.
[14] Nicholas B. Dirks, "The Invention of Caste: Civil Society in Colonial India," *Social Analysis* XXV (1989), p. 44.

narratives. These historians are collectively referred to as 'nationalist'. The term does not identify a particular school of thought but simply refers to a particular way of writing history. In fact, to use the words of one of them, nationalist historians were those scholars "whose primary or even secondary objects [included] an examination or re-examination of some points of national interest or importance..."[15] Like their foreign counterparts nationalist historians were embedded in contemporary Indian happenings, but while the former were busy constructing the colonial empire, the latter were engaged in the struggle for independence. Necessarily, nationalist historians "felt the impact of the national movement, and this was reflected in their historical writing."[16] Their approach to Indian ancient history however did not produce new theories as much as radically new reinterpretations.[17] Thus while "the British were never tired of repeating that India was not a country but a congeries of smaller states, and the Indians were not a nation but a conglomeration of peoples of diverse creeds and sects,"[18] the nationalist historians "...studied ancient emperors and saw the rise of a nation-state in the creation of these ancient empires."[19] In their view, ideas of nationhood and nation-state were not so much a construct of the present but an indigenous product of Indian civilisation. Consequently, they glorified the times which saw the rise of imperial structures. The Gupta period in particular was termed the golden age of Indian history. Significantly the periodisation first introduced by J. Mill was accepted but nationalist historians submitted it to reinterpretation. The Hindu period became now the apex of Indian achievements. This was followed by a phase of decadence which culminated in the British period. The Hindu state was therefore epitomised as a strong, centralised imperial structure with a highly developed system of central administration.

The assumption of Indian historical and social immobility was accepted but while for the British it was synonymous with stagnation and passivity, for the nationalists it became a sign of stability, the result of Indian ancient Aryan culture.[20] Periods which did not witness the rise of imperial systems were downplayed and interpreted as periods of dynastic transitions. Changes were not perceived as expressions of structural transformations but as consequences of either military

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[15] R.C. Majumdar, "Nationalist Historians," C.H. Philips ed., *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon* (London, 1961), p. 417.
[16] Thapar, "Interpretations of Ancient Indian History," p. 10.
[17] For the link between nationalist and colonialist thought see Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought in the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London, 1986), particularly pp. 36-39.
[18] Majumdar, "Nationalist Historians," p. 422.
[19] Prakash, "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World...," p. 388.
[20] Thapar, "Interpretations of Ancient Indian History," p. 11.

conquest or dynastic succession or both.[21] The Oriental Despotism theory, very much dependent on the same notion of stagnation, was therefore reversed. Not only was the Indian monarch benevolent, but also a constitutional one.[22] The positive revaluation of Indian ancient history naturally involved also Hinduism and the caste system. In this respect, nationalist historians salvaged Hindu religion from the very poor consideration offered it by utilitarians such as J. Mill. A distinction was thus introduced between the pure Hinduism of the Vedic texts and the subsequent degeneration and superstitions of later times. Spirituality was now reconsidered as a characteristic trait of Indian culture, contrasted with and deemed superior to the materialism of the West. The caste system itself, though again conceptualised with the socio-religious categories of the Orientalist narrative, was now considered a pure form, the expression of a universal fourfold division and distinguished by the contemporary proliferation of *jātis*. "That model of order was a logical and complete system for the division of labour and, even more, of man's nature. It was also one of organic solidarity and universal, applying to all mankind and not just to India."[23]

Although this pattern of thinking and writing history was born during and conditioned by the nationalist struggle for independence, it actually survived the establishment of the modern Indian state. What is more, it apparently continues to nourish the kind of historical writing which dominates India today. For instance, considering the time and the area at study in this dissertation, R.C. Majumdar in 1943 published his two-volume monograph on the history of Bengal.[24] The general attitude in the work is eulogistic and reflects well the nationalist historical narrative. In 1971 the same author reedited the first volume but maintained both the attitude and the structure of the previous work.[25] Again ten years later Majumdar, the editor of a new massive series dedicated to Indian history, in the chapters devoted to the early medieval period repeats once again the style of historical narrative of his previous

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[21] H. Kulke, "Introduction: The Study of the State in Pre-modern India," H. Kulke ed., *The State in India: 1000-1700* (Delhi, 1995), p. 4.
[22] A.L. Basham, "Modern Historians of Ancient India," C.H. Philips ed., *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon* (London, 1961), p. 283. K.P. Jayaswal in his *Hindu Polity* went as far as to claim that the state in ancient India knew of parliamentary democracy and was in fact little different from contemporary European political institutions.
[23] Inden, *Imagining India*, p. 72.
[24] R.C. Majumdar, *History of Bengal* (Dacca, 1943), 2 volumes.
[25] R.C. Majumdar, *History of Ancient Bengal* (Calcutta, 1971).

works.[26] The same is to be said of Jhunu Bagchi who, although not being as renowned as Majumdar, a few years ago published his PhD dissertation on the history of the Pāla kings. Remarkably, he mostly repeats the same kind of historical tone. The author while introducing 'the political history of the Pāla kings' describes the situation after Śaśāṅka in this way:

> ...the administration of Bengal collapsed completely by disunity, political disintegration, internal conflicts and repeated foreign invasions which continued for nearly a century. [...] The sufferings and strife of the common people were intolerable. [...] However, they suddenly developed some political wisdom and a spirit of unparalleled self-sacrifice. They realised that by voluntary surrender of authority by the numerous petty chiefs to one single person could only give birth to a most expected moral and happy state. Thus "without any struggle," the independent political chiefs recognised the suzerainty of a popular hero named Gopāla.[27]

Reacting to British historical narratives, nationalist historians failed to distance themselves from the former's epistemological framework. Basically, Indian history continued and often continues to be thought of and conceptualised in opposition to and hence in relationship with the West. In part this is explained by the fact that all those scholars belonged to and were part of the Indian English-educated elite. All that those historians did was to transform "the object of knowledge – India – from passive to active, from inert to sovereign, capable to (*sic*) relating to history and reason."[28]

3. **The Feudal state**

The myth of the unchangeableness of Asiatic societies, found at the heart of both the Oriental Despotism and Asiatic Mode of Production notions was effectively overcome by the development of Marxist historiography particularly after independence.[29] D.D.

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[26] R.C. Majumdar ed., *A Comprehensive History of India* (Delhi, 1981). The chapters 16, 22 and 23 of the 1st part of volume 3 deal with the Rāṣṭrakūṭas, the Gurjara-Pratihāras and the Pālas. Notably the expression 'early medieval period' employed above is not found in Majumdar's work. Significantly the 1st part of volume 3 deals with political history (i.e. dynastic succession) and the 2nd part with social, economic, literary, artistic and religious development. The compartmentalisation of historical knowledge is another salient characteristic of this kind of history writing.

[27] J. Bagchi, *The History and Culture of the Pālas of Bengal and Bihar* (New Delhi, 1993), p. 36.

[28] Prakash, "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World...," p. 388.

[29] Indian Marxist studies started in the 1940s with B.N. Datta and S.A. Dange. However the anti-Marxist academic environment of that time coupled with these authors' poor academic sophistication prevented the recognition of their scholarship. See D.N. Jha, "The Economic History of India up to AD 1200: Trends and Prospects," R.S. Sharma ed., *Survey of Research in Economic and Social History of India* (Delhi, 1986), pp. 9-10.

Kosambi's famous *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* remains a landmark study in this regard. The work in fact signalled a radical break with traditional Orientalist and nationalist historical narratives. Indian history was no longer seen as a rather flat succession of dynasties at the head of more or less centralised imperial structures, interspersed with periods of foreign domination. On the contrary, these historical and political episodes were now interpreted as secondary expressions and manifestations of fundamental changes in the economic fabric of Indian society. In Kosambi's own words, history is defined

> *as the presentation, in chronological order, of successive developments in the means and relations of production.*[30]

The introduction of the Marxist concept of Mode of Production allowed Kosambi to set up a new framework from which to look at Indian history. Obviously, such an adoption exposed Kosambi to the accusation of superimposing a foreign straitjacket on Indian historical reality. However, he simply tried to apply the Marxist method, based on the theory of historical and dialectical materialism, to the Indian context and in doing so came to refute some of Marx's own views, among which were the notion of the Asiatic Mode of Production and the linear succession of slave, feudal and capitalist societies. If this European kind of development was at first accepted as a working hypothesis, it was later modified to better suit Indian reality. For instance, Kosambi did not find a place for a slave society in the socio-economic developments of the Indian past. On another level, the new approach allowed him to subject the traditional source of Indian history (i.e. Sanskrit literature), to a reinterpretation and criticism. What is more the new approach required an enlargement of the sources to include epigraphy, archaeology and anthropology.[31]

If ancient India did not develop a slave society it did however undergo a feudal phase. Kosambi effectively introduced a concept which eventually came to dominate modern Indian historiography. According to him feudalism developed in two phases in India. During the first centuries of the Christian era, the simple structure of peasant economy was increasingly disturbed by the kings' transfer of administrative, fiscal and judicial rights to subordinate chiefs who thus came into direct contact with the

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[30] D.D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (Bombay, first published 1956, 1996 reprint of the 2nd revised edition), p. 1. Italics as in the original.
[31] See Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, pp. 1-16.

peasantry. This process he terms as 'feudalism from above' and chronologically covers the period from the 3rd to the 13th centuries. With the foundation of the Delhi Sultanate (1206 AD), a new phase of feudalism began, which Kosambi calls 'feudalism from below'. This stage is characterised by the rise of a local land-owning class which increasingly wields military power over local village populations.[32]

Kosambi's attempt was not well received in academic circles. His feudalism theory in fact leaves much to be desired in terms of empirical evidence and historical concatenation or development.[33] However the merit of his methodological approach has been widely recognised by both Marxist and non-Marxist historians alike. He effectively displaced the state as the sole object of historical attention and embedded it in a wider socio-economic framework. What is more, he injected historical dynamism into an otherwise sterile narrative. In a meaningful way Kosambi gave to India a concept of history which Orientalists and Marx himself had persistently denied.

The possibility of a feudal phase in Indian history, however, did not die with Kosambi. In 1965, R.S. Sharma, summarising and bringing to completion his previous work, published *Indian Feudalism*. In this work he laid the conceptual foundations of the Indian brand of feudalism. The text itself became the standard work on the topic, the focus of a continuous debate up to the present day. The importance of Sharma's conceptualisation and the debate it originated in modern historiography cannot be overstated and calls for a detailed presentation.

At the basis of Sharma's feudalist theory is the policy of land-grants that monarchs implemented in North India from the Gupta period. Such a policy impinged directly on the socio-economic and political structure of those early states. On the one hand, land-grants 'disintegrated central authority' for together with property rights, administrative rights were also relinquished to the donees; on the other hand, they created a powerful landholding class interposed between the ruler and the actual cultivators.[34] Central authority was then further undermined by the practice of sub-infeudation.[35] Basically land-grants were instrumental in replacing an administrative hierarchy founded on regular units of territorial jurisdiction with a political hierarchy

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[32] *Ibid.*, chapters 9 and 10 respectively. The exact definitions for the two phases of feudal development are found on p. 295.

[33] It should be noted however that Kosambi did not intend constructing a definite history of India but simply wanted "to delineate a wide framework within which detailed results may be expected, while pointing out the methods available for reaching the end of such investigations:" *ibid.*, p. 14. Judging from later historiographic developments, the original aim of Kosambi's work has been amply fulfilled!

[34] R.S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism: c. 300-1200* (Calcutta, 1965) , pp. 2-5.

[35] *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

made up by the new order of *sāmantas*, semi-independent lords, proprietors of large estates, who paid nominal allegiance to the king. Vassals and officials, beneficiaries of royal service grants, entrenched themselves territorially and eventually were established as local potentates. Until 1000 AD, however, evidence of service grants is scanty and it is only between 1000-1200 AD that epigraphs bear real import on the question.[36] The lack of epigraphic evidence in the initial phase of feudalism does not however invalidate the theory, according to Sharma, who explains that scarcity by the perishable materials on which service grants were recorded.

The restructuring of the political order brought about by the policy of land-grants caused and was itself the effect of radical changes in the economic texture of the state. The estates granted tended to become self-sufficient economic units. The effect of such isolation is revealed by the paucity of coins and the decline of regional and international commercial activities in the period. Economy was no longer geared to market oriented production but to a form of production simply intended to satisfy local needs. Urbanisation too suffered a considerable decline. To compensate the diminished revenue from towns and commercial activities, the early medieval state resorted to agricultural expansion in hitherto waste or jungle lands, which incorporated tribal, non-Aryan and autochthonous populations within the fold of Sanskritic culture.[37] The emergence of an intermediary class of landowners aggravated the socio-economic condition of the peasantry. From the 8th century, serfdom became a common feature in the rural areas of North India. Often donors not only transferred property rights but also the cultivators of the land in question, who became part and parcel of the donated property itself.[38] Recorded instances of peasants' uprisings were desperate attempts to break free from a situation of abject subjugation.[39] This again was the result of the parcellisation of central administration and of the independence or semi-independence of local magnates.[40]

Sharma's theory of feudalism was widely accepted albeit with some dissent. D.C. Sircar, for instance, after a passionate refutation of the feudal model, dubbed it a 'misnomer' in the Indian context.[41] Landlordism, he argued, was not to be confused

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[36] *Ibid.*, p. 159.
[37] R.S. Sharma, *Urban Decay in India* (Delhi, 1987), the whole of chapter 10.
[38] Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, pp. 48-60.
[39] R.S. Sharma, "Problems of Peasant Protest in Early Medieval India," *Social Scientist* 16.9 (September 1988), pp. 3-16.
[40] Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, pp. 63-73.
[41] D.C. Sircar, *Landlordism and Tenancy in Ancient and Medieval India as Revealed by Epigraphical Records* (Lucknow, 1969), p. 48.

with feudalism. Emphasising the paucity of service grants, Sircar denies that from the early centuries of the Christian era onwards the pattern of land grants changes. The distinction between ancient and medieval seems thus to make little sense to him.

Although Sircar's critique is often pertinent in matters of epigraphic interpretation and analysis, he is unable to formulate an overall synthesis without at the same time falling back on nationalist assumptions. Sharma in a review article of Sircar's *Studies in the Political and Administrative Systems of Ancient and Medieval India*, consistently counteracts Sircar's criticism and reaffirms that "the essence of Indian Feudalism [...] consists in the gross unequal distribution of land or its produce leading to the emergence of a hierarchy of landed magnates between the king and the actual tillers who are reduced to the position of semi-serfs as a result of numerous impositions made on them."[42]

The debate on feudalism was enriched and enlivened in 1973 by the publication of B.N.S. Yadava's work. Apart from adding empirical evidence in terms of military and service grants,[43] Yadava lists foreign invasions as one of the reasons engendering feudal development.[44] Basically his attempt does not produce any new perspective and may well be perceived as an extension of Sharma's work. In comparison Yadava perhaps "shifted the emphasis of his studies on Indian feudalism slightly towards the political sphere of feudalism"[45] more than Sharma did.

The identification of foreign invasions and the collapse of long distance international trade as two of the causes for the rise of Indian feudalism exposed the theory to a subtle critique. Feudalism in India was portrayed as the result of external factors rather than internal developments.[46] This led to a rethinking of the question in terms of internal social contradictions. The ideology of the Kali age as portrayed in the *Purāṇas* was thus identified as corresponding to a period of social upheaval characterised by intermixture of castes (*varṇasaṃkara*), economic decline, foreign invasions, natural calamities, the rise of the *śūdras*, the degeneration of the *vaiśyas*

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[42] R.S. Sharma, "Indian Feudalism Retouched," *The Indian Historical Review* 1.2 (1974), p. 327.
[43] B.N.S. Yadava, *Society and Culture in Northern India in the Twelfth Century* (Allahabad, 1973), p. 142ff.
[44] *Ibid.*, pp. 138-139.
[45] Kulke, "Introduction: The Study of the State...," p. 10.
[46] D.N. Jha, "Presidential Address," *Indian History Congress* (Proceedings of the 40th session, Waltair, 1979), p. 20. See also V.K. Thakur, "Decline or Diffusion: Constructing the Urban Tradition of North India During the Gupta Period," *The Indian Historical Review* XXIV.1-2 (July 1997 & January 1998), p. 57.

etc.[47] Apparently this social upheaval spelt doom for the urban and mercantile traditions of ancient India and, engendering the feudal development, ushered into the early medieval period. However, this construct is manifestly weak and clearly betrays the nationalist assumptions which the feudalist theory incorporates. First, instead of apportioning blame to the crisis of the Kali age for the decline of the ancient urban civilisation, can we not also say that that crisis was the result of urban decline? Second, feudalism yet again results from the conceptual construct of 'medieval crisis' which necessarily infers, as a postulate, the 'golden age' of the previous period (i.e. the ancient). The introduction of the category 'early medieval' does not thus escape the assumption embedded in the nationalist sort of periodisation but simply better qualifies it.

The theory of feudalism as developed by successive generations of Marxist scholars is a major feature of Indian historiography. Its acceptance by a large section of scholars, however, does not protect it from criticism. On an empirical level, the theory is in fact far from well documented. B.D. Chattopadhyaya, following Sircar, has remarked that the bulk of epigraphic evidence relates to religious grants with no or little evidence of any contractual element.[48] It is thus unclear how these grants engendered a feudal polity. Was feudalism therefore the product of an administrative practice? Economic stagnation, in the form of urban decadence, demonetisation and the isolation of the village economy is also highly debatable. Again Chattopadhyaya in an earlier study distinguishes three periods of urbanisation in India: the Indus valley urbanism, the early historical (from the 6th century BC) and early medieval urbanism (basically the post-Gupta period).[49] The early medieval period witness a decline of early historic settlements but was itself a period of a new urban development. The question is complex but it may however be noted that Chattopadhyaya himself by tentatively distinguishing the second from the third phase, does admit that decadence set in during the Gupta period.[50] He eventually minimises the disjuncture and opts for a sort of

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[47] B.N.S. Yadava, "The Accounts of the Kali Age and the Social Transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages," D.N. Jha ed., *Feudal Social Formation in Early India* (Delhi, 1987), p. 66. This article was first published in *The Indian Historical Review* V.1-2 (July 1978-January 1979), pp. 31-63. See also R.S. Sharma, "The Kali Age: a Period of Social Crisis," D.N. Jha ed., *Feudal Social Formation in Early India* (Delhi, 1987), p. 48.

[48] B.D. Chattopadhyaya, "Political Processes and Structure of Polity in Early Medieval India," B.D. Chattopadhyaya ed., *The Making of Early Medieval India* (Delhi, paperback 1997), p. 193.

[49] B.D. Chattopadhyaya, "Urban Centres in Early Medieval India: An Overview," (first published 1987) B.D. Chattopadhyaya ed., *The Making of Early Medieval India* (Delhi, paperback 1997), p. 158.

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 159.

continuity between the two phases.[51] The question remains, however, as to why it is necessary to differentiate a second from a third phase of urbanisation.

In a more careful study of the patterns of rural settlements in early medieval Bengal, the same author explodes the widely held feudalist tenet of self-enclosed economic units. On the basis of geographical and ecological considerations Chattopadhyaya is able to show that village settlements were generally established "in close proximity to natural sources of surface water or to what were essentially extensions of such sources."[52] These water sources spatially identified and separated various inhabited areas from each other. Referring then to the contemporary perception of rural space, he states that a settlement area was defined in relation to other settlement areas: "a settlement was essentially viewed in terms of spatial and social interaction..."[53] The conclusion is evident: a closed village economy would be incompatible with the way in which village settlements were spaced in relation to one another. Epigraphic evidence relating to the grant of several plots in different villages would then underline the socio-economic interactions which existed among villages.[54] In this respect, J. Heitzman has skilfully illustrated the great range of interactions which centred on the imperial Cōḷa temple of Rājarājeśvara. Its annual functioning required a complex transactional network which linked the temple to the human and economic resources of villages far distant from it. The network effectively "brought a commercial and monetary arena under the regulation of royal authority, which in turn rationalised measurements and equivalencies.[55]

It has to be admitted, however, that in the feudalism theory the notion of village self-sufficiency has been subjected to several interpretations. Indeed in Sharma's work alone the notion is formulated in three different ways. Thus 'closed economy' is taken to signify a) self-sufficiency of the village; b) self-sufficiency of a locality, including a number of villages; c) self-sufficiency of an area including several localities.[56] According to V.M. Jha closed economy essentially refers to a lack of 'commercial exchange', and not of 'exchange' as such. The latter would imply monetary transactions, while the

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[51] *Ibid.*, p. 181.
[52] B.D. Chattopadhyaya, *Aspects of Rural Settlements and Rural Society in Early Medieval India* (Calcutta, 1990), p. 30.
[53] *Ibid.*, p. 33.
[54] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[55] J. Heitzman, *Gifts of Power: Lordship in an Early Indian State* (Delhi, 1997), p. 127. The entirety of chapter 4 is relevant to the argument.
[56] See V.M. Jha, "Settlement, Society and Polity in Early Medieval Rural India," *The Indian Historical Review* XX.1-2 (July 93-Jan. 94), p. 56-57.

former would merely refer to exchanges in kind.[57] Even this further specification, though, does not seem to resolve the ambiguity implicit in the notion of 'self-sufficient village economy'.

To conclude the survey of the empirical difficulties faced by feudalism theory, we may raise the issue of the supposed demonetisation of early medieval economies. This argument is essentially derived from two considerations: the paucity of coinage in early medieval India and its debasement. J.S. Deyell however, while admitting a paucity of coin types, has successfully showed that the number of coins in circulation during the early medieval period was even greater than that in circulation during Kuṣana and Gupta times.[58] He reaches this conclusion by applying traditional numismatic analysis supplemented by statistical techniques to coin hoards.[59] What is more, he argues that coins "debasement is not *a priori* evidence of economic decline."[60] However, allowing for the necessary complexity of interpretation which numismatic evidence seems to entail and which Deyell has rightly drawn our attention to, it is a fact that in early medieval Pāla India no numismatic evidence exists, leaving us little complexity to interpret![61]

The feudalism theory has also faced a different kind of criticism. Influenced both by the linear succession of Marxist historical analysis and by nationalist historical narratives, Marxist historians have seen the feudal set-up in opposition to a strong, centralised, bureaucratic Mauryan state.[62] Unfortunately the existence of such a state is dubious, particularly after R. Thapar published her revised work on the topic. It is sufficient to look at what Thapar understands to be an empire. Thus

> [an] empire may be seen as a complex form of the state since it includes differentiated political and economic systems. Perhaps the component units within an empire may be listed as, firstly, a metropolitan state which

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[57] *Ibid.*, p. 57.
[58] J.S. Deyell, *Living without Silver* (Delhi, 1990), p. 36.
[59] *Ibid.*, pp. 15-18.
[60] *Ibid.*, p. 5. He goes on to say that "in an economy in which price relationships were fixed by contractual, regulatory or traditional means supplementary to supply and demand considerations, debasement would be an attractive reaction to inflationary forces."
[61] The argument will be briefly discussed in the following chapter. Here however we may note Wink's statement that "nowhere in the Pāla territories the economy was demonetized...:" A. Wink, *Al-Hind, the Making of the Indo-Islamic World* (Leiden, 1991), p. 272. It is difficult to understand on what grounds he holds such a view! If we consider cowrie-shells as a form of money, as indeed they were, then one could argue that there was no demonetisation in the Pāla domains. However, I would expect Wink to explain the economic significance of the change from metal coinage.
[62] Heitzman, *Gifts of Power...*, p. 15. See also Chattopadhyaya, "Political Processes and Structure of Polity...," pp. 191-93.

> initiates conquest and control, secondly core areas, and thirdly a large number of variegated, peripheral areas.[63]

The uneven political organisation of the Mauryan empire, as outlined in Thapar's work, was not of the centralised kind found in the nationalist and Marxist stereotypes, but was multicentred. The supposed fragmentation of political authority, postulated after the break up of the Mauryan empire, might not then be seen as fragmentation at all. Crucially, the plurality of centres of power may precede the presence of an intermediary class between the peasantry and the state, depriving the feudalism theory of a major theoretical prop. The feudalism theory must thus address this problem and re-articulate the transition between ancient and medieval periods on a different basis.

A serious challenge to the feudal construct has also come from Marxist scholarship. In his 1979 paper, H. Mukhia vehemently refuted the idea of an Indian feudalism. Unlike Europe, feudalism in the Indian context is portrayed as a development 'from above', something which did not come from changes in the mode of production but which was the result of administrative and political practices. Mukhia objects to such a genesis arguing that it is in fact doubtful that political action can at all engender a complex social structure such as feudalism.[64] But Mukhia's most poignant critique challenges the very concept of peasant's subjection in early medieval India. According to him, we may speak of the increasing exploitation of the peasantry in the Indian context but not of its dependence. The latter would imply an extraneous control over the process of production which simply did not exist. He in fact characterises the condition of Indian peasantry as free, "in the economic rather than in the legal sense."[65] Mukhia, however, seems to overlook the simple fact that in the feudal mode of production "the direct producer [...] is to be found [...] in possession of his own means of production, the necessary material labour conditions required for the realisation of his labour and the production of his means of subsistence."[66] Paradoxically, his argument strengthens and supports the feudal construct! But there is even more to consider here. Marx indicates that because of the 'economic freedom' of the direct producer, "the surplus-labour for the nominal owner of the land can only be extorted

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[63] Romila Thapar, *The Mauryas Revisited* (Calcutta, first published 1987, reprint 1993), p. 4. For the Maurya administrative organisation see pp. 18-20.

[64] H. Mukhia, "Was There Feudalism in Indian History?," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 8.2 (January 1981), p. 286. A previous version of this paper was delivered as the Presidential Address to the Medieval India Section, Indian History Congress Waltair, 1979.

[65] *Ibid.*, p. 286.

[66] K. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, quoted in Derek Sayer, *The Violence of Abstraction* (Oxford, 1987), p. 71.

from them [i.e. the direct producers] by other than economic pressure, whatever the form may be..."[67] Mukhia recognises this[68] but at the same time inconsistently and to me incomprehensibly affirms that "[the Indian state] remained by and large uninvolved with the processes of production. Its coercive power was therefore never rooted in the production system."[69] It remains thus unexplained where the peasant's exploitation he talks about comes from, and more importantly, what the state he so imagines is rooted in!

Apparently both supporters and detractors of the feudalism theory seem to commit the same kind of theoretical mistake. As Chattopadhyaya says "the distinctive contribution of the study of 'Indian feudalism' [...] consists in the attempt to bridge the gap between polity and society,"[70] the word 'polity' being used here in the somewhat reduced meaning of 'state'. In fact we may surmise that the Orientalist historical narrative mainly concentrated on society, thus denying an effective place and role to politics. The opposite, of course, was true of the nationalist reaction. But a distinctive contribution to the study of pre-modern Indian history cannot come about as long as the distinction between state and society is maintained! In fact there is no question of articulating state and society or, which is the same, state and civil society simply because these categories, being borrowed from capitalist social formations, do not make sense in pre-modern India. The failure of feudalism theory is that it reproduces the mistake of articulating a pre-capitalist mode of production with capitalist categories. This explains why despite Sharma's definition of feudalism "as a mechanism for the distribution of the means of production and for the appropriation of the surplus,"[71] the feudalism he and others talk about is of a mere political and legal nature. In fact in the feudalist discourse, there is a constant and unresolved tension between economic forces and political structures. Therefore sometimes the state is portrayed as the victim of dynamics and relations of production, and, in a way, destroyed by them;[72] while

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[67] K. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, quoted in Sayer, *The Violence of Abstraction*, p. 72.
[68] H. Mukhia, "Peasant Production and Medieval Indian Society," *The Journal of the Peasant Studies* 12.2-3 (January-April 1985), p. 245.
[69] *Ibid.*, p. 245. See also his "Was There Feudalism in Indian History?," p. 286: "Thus forced labour in India remained, by and large, *an incidental manifestation* of the ruling class' political and administrative power rather than a part of the process of production (italics mine)."
[70] Chattopadhyaya, "Political Processes and Structure of Polity...," p. 190.
[71] R.S. Sharma, "How Feudal was Indian Feudalism," H. Kulke ed., *The State in India: 1000-1700* (Delhi, 1995), p. 50. This 1985 article may be considered as Sharma's final major elaboration of the Indian feudalism theory.
[72] See Yadava, *Society and Culture...*, p. 151. Here the author asks himself "How political authority tended to merge with property in land in the feudalistic set-up...," as if the two were different realities, independent from one another!

elsewhere it is construed as the originator of feudal tendencies and of its own demise.[73] In either case however, the state and its debacle are the real centre of the historian's attention. The pre-feudal state is then imagined as the real state and the feudal one can only be comparatively qualified as decadent, fragmented, decentralised, – a mere shadow of its former self! Mukhia thus has perhaps the merit of exploding the unresolved tension of the feudalists' 'state' and 'society' and of separating what the latter unsuccessfully tried to reconcile. Detached from socio-economic conditions, the state, in the feudal construct, was deconstructed by those same conditions. Ultimately the feudalists' state becomes an abstraction indistinguishable from that postulated by the nationalists.

Admittedly, the way in which the concept of the mode of production has been employed by both supporters and detractors of the feudalism theory could not but result in such a dichotomous hypostatisation. In the feudalist discourse the 'extra economic pressure' by means of which surplus is siphoned off the direct producers is not a constituent element of the production process but its external adjunct. Lordship, far from constituting production relations, is conceptualised as wholly 'extra-economic' in nature. This presupposes the classic Marxist binary opposition between superstructure and base where a dichotomy between ideological forms and economic forces is said to govern social development. Eventually the fracture is construed as opposition between state and society respectively. This on the one hand allows Mukhia to detach the state from the production process and on the other permits Sharma to construe a class of landed intermediaries in-between the state and the peasantry, a kind of state within a state! In fact the distinction between ideological forms and economic forces cannot make sense but in a capitalist and modern context. In early medieval India, economy, religion, politics and so on exist only as forms of human practices in analogical relationship to correspondent forms in the capitalist context. To think of them as separate entities is to project categories which properly define and only pertain to the capitalist mode of production onto pre-capitalist modes of production.

4. The integrative and processual state

In recent years a new model of history writing has earned a place within Indian

[73] *Ibid.*, pp. 141-42. In the 11th-12th centuries when a supposed economic revival takes place "the *sāmanta* hierarchy and the lord-vassal nexus do not reveal any marked sign of decline."

historiography. Chattopadhyaya, perhaps the most outspoken representative of the new trend, perceives early medieval political formations on the basis of a continuous process of state formation which starts with the Mauryas and continues thereafter. This process consists of the extension of what he calls 'state societies' into areas of 'pre-state societies'.[74] The political expansion of the 'state society' has to be seen in parallel with contemporary economic, social and religious processes. Thus the spread of rural settlements,[75] the inclusion of tribes within the *varṇa* fold (i.e. Sanskritisation)[76] and the incorporation of local cults[77] allow Chattopadhyaya to overcome the dichotomy between centralisation/decentralisation and to speak of the early medieval state as 'a process of integration', the result of 'a range of interactions'. Seemingly, what distinguished the early medieval state from previous political formations was its regional dimension. Thus Chattopadhyaya writes: "in trying to decipher the dominant pattern from among apparently irreconcilable sets of evidence [...], the most dominant pattern seems to be the shaping of regional societies."[78]

H. Kulke, elaborating further this model, systematises the 'continuum of state formation' in three distinct phases. He thus identifies 'the chiefdom', 'the early kingdom' and 'the imperial kingdom' which in Sanskrit terminology would correspond to the evolution from *rājā* to *mahārāja* to *mahārājādhirāja*.[79] The model, according to the author, is only heuristic and helpful in ascertaining traits of structural changes. In other words, we will not find three distinct states, one following the other, in early medieval India![80] The change from one stage to the next is determined by the continuous expansion and penetration of a chiefly power first within a nuclear zone, then within that zone's periphery and eventually within neighbouring nuclear areas. More specifically, the change is also one from 'samantaisation' (from the first to the second phase) to provincialisation (from the second to the third phase).[81] What Kulke is aiming to identify is the progressive centralisation of the social formations. This centralisation however "merely failed."[82] Both Chattopadhyaya and Kulke give a legitimating function

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[74] Chattopadhyaya, "Political Processes and Structure of Polity ...:" *ibid.*, p. 205.
[75] *Ibid.*, p. 202.
[76] *Ibid.*, p. 203.
[77] *Ibid.*, p. 203. H. Kulke similarly speaks of the three features of the process of state formation as 'sanskritisation', 'kṣatriyaisation' and 'Hinduisation'. See H. Kulke, "The Early and the Imperial Kingdom: A Processural Model of Integrative State Formation in Early Medieval India," H. Kulke ed., *The State in India: 1000-1700* (Delhi, 1995), pp. 261-62.
[78] Chattopadhyaya, "Introduction: The Making of Early Medieval India," p. 34.
[79] Kulke, "The Early and the Imperial Kingdom: A Processural Model...," p. 234.
[80] *Ibid.*, p. 234.
[81] *Ibid.*, p. 253.
[82] *Ibid.*, p. 257.

to the numerous land charters of the period. The horizontal spread of the early medieval social formations required the religious recognition of royal power. *Brāhmaṇas* and religious institutions thus provided temporal power with spiritual blessing and support.

It is noticeable that this sort of historical narrative has numerous points which it shares with proponents of the feudalism theory. Both accord major importance to the processes of agrarian expansion and tribal absorption which apparently constituted the originating matrix of early medieval social formations. However while in feudalism theory this multiform expansion is rooted in the context of urban decline and collapsing trading activities, in Chattopadhyaya and Kulke's narratives it becomes a sort of postulate, a kind of evolutionary necessity. In fact the whole construct of a processual and integrative state requires further elaboration and critique.

From an empirical point of view and from the geographical perspective of Pāla India, I am not entirely convinced that agrarian expansion took place on such a scale as to engender the kind of structural and political changes supposed by Chattopadhyaya and Kulke. The Pāla charters donated cultivated land or land which was already a source of income. This is borne out by the fact that most of the Pāla gifts consisted of villages and not of plots of land as in the Gupta sale-deeds. The reclamation of uncultivated land must have been carried out on a small scale. In fact the land or villages, objects of the grants, appear to have already been under cultivation. Of course, the sale-deeds of Gupta times usually transferred waste or uncultivated land (*khila-kṣettra*) but it is unlikely that these private purchases permit us to speak of agrarian expansion. Besides, not one of the Gupta or Pāla charters refer to the kind of massive grants such as that of the Pāla contemporary king Śrīcandra who, approximately in the year 930 AD, donated an enormous area in eastern Bengal to settle 6,000 *brāhmaṇas*.[83] Nor do they resemble the 7th century Tippera plate of Lokanātha which transferred a large tract of jungle in Northeast Bengal.[84] Both these charters detailing huge donations would give us grounds to speak of a process of agricultural expansion, but not the

[83] Quoted in Chattopadhyaya, *Aspects of Rural Settlements...*, p. 28. See also pp. 67-69.
[84] R.G. Basak, "Tipperah Copper-plate Grant of Lokanātha: the 44th Year," *EI* XV (1919-20), pp. 301-15.

Gupta or Pāla plates.[85] In the chapters which follow I will attempt to show that agrarian expansion in Pāla India was less geographical and more political, and was related to the stronger political hold that those kings exercised on the land they ruled.

The same idea of tribal absorption, which a supposed agrarian expansion entailed, also leaves much to be desired in terms of empirical evidence. The notion itself betrays the persistence of an old conceptual framework still awaiting empirical validation. 'Tribe' is a category borrowed from Social Anthropology which has not as yet found a precise definition.[86] Furthermore, its racial and ethnic underpinnings make it a highly controversial term, liable to political instrumentalisation. It should not be forgotten that the notion was employed first in Indian history by Orientalist historians in the context of the so called theory of the Aryan invasion! According to this theory, the Aryans were the superior race which entered India and progressively defeated the local inferior 'tribal' populations. Since then Indian history has been portrayed as the battlefield of an ongoing struggle between the two races.[87] In fact neither the feudalists nor Chattopadhyaya explain the criteria of tribal classification. Apart from the philological consideration according to which some of the names found in early medieval Indian inscriptions seem to derive from non-Sanskritic roots there is nothing in inscriptions, to the best of my knowledge, which warrants the use of the term 'tribe'.

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[85] Even this interpretation is debatable. V.M. Jha, for instance, argues that the Paschimbhag plates of Śrīcandra do not refer to the expansion of agrarian space; see his "Settlement, Society and Polity in Early Medieval Rural India," *The Indian Historical Review* XX.1-2, pp. 35-36. The pattern of land donations and consequently of agrarian expansion in contemporary Kāmarūpa is similar to Pāla and Gupta charters from Bengal. See Nayanjot Lahiri, "Landholding and Peasantry in the Brahmaputra Valley: c. 5th-13th Centuries A.D.," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* (*JESHO*) 33 (1990), pp. 157-68; Chitrarekha Gupta, "Evolution of Agrarian Society in Kāmarūpa in Early Medieval Period," *The Indian Historical Review* XIX.1-2 (July 1992 & January 1993), pp. 1-20.

[86] The argument is complex and goes beyond the restricted purposes of this dissertation. For a start see A. Beteille, "The Concept of Tribe with Special Reference to India," *European Journal of Sociology* XXVII (1986), pp. 297-318; F.G. Bailey, "'Tribe' and 'Caste' in India," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 5 (1961), pp. 7-19. Beteille refutes the evolutionary concept of tribe as opposed to non-tribe and opts instead for a historical approach. Tribe is such because it has remained more or less outside Hindu civilisation. Eventually it is political power which establishes what tribe is and is not. Bailey tries to distinguish tribe from what tribe is not on the basis of agrarian organisation and access to land. Tribal then qualifies a segmentary system and non-tribal (i.e. caste) an organic one. Both arguments however have their own shortcomings.

[87] This is certainly true of Orientalist and nationalist historians. For instance back in 1868 W.W. Hunter speaks of West Bengal as "the outpost of the Sanskrit race:" his *Annals of Rural Bengal* (London, 1st edition 1868, 7th edition 1897), p. 3; the whole of chapters 3 and 4 deal with tribes. As already remarked, political and agrarian expansion is often intended in terms of tribal absorption. It is common to both feudalists and the proponents of the processual state, and it is also shared by authors like Richard M. Eaton who to explain the Islamisation of 15th-16th century East Bengal refers to "the different degree of Aryanisation in the eastern and western delta:" R.M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: 1204-1760* (Berkeley, paperback 1996), p. 19, *passim*.

Tribe is a modern category which is applied to Indian reality from the beginning of British colonial rule.[88]

Consistent with his own framework, Chattopadhyaya then introduces two categories which, according to him, highlight and identify the historical changes of the period. The total sum of the socio-economic and religious changes transformed the local or regional centres of power in what he calls 'state societies', which he then contrasts with and opposes to 'pre-state societies'. Apparently 'state-society' refers to a society which has developed a state form as opposed to a 'pre-state society' in which such an institution has not developed.[89] Chattopadhyaya obviously associates 'tribal absorption' with 'stateless society' making them coalesce in the category 'pre-state society'. This terminology however is ambiguous and does not seem to be deeply rooted in the empirical reality it tries to explain. North-eastern India, for instance, had known of a governmental structure at least from the time of the Mauryas. In this case, it is not clear what he means by 'pre-state society' when applied to that area. Kulke's systematisation is just as ambiguous and unclear. Does a 'state society' correspond to the last phase of the process of state formation? If so, what distinguishes the third phase from the preceding two? Indeed both Chattopadhyaya and Kulke seem to identify a 'pre-state society' with non-regionalisation, and a 'state society' with regionalisation![90] If this were true, it would mean that as long as a region (i.e. what is now Bengal) falls within a 'major' political structure (i.e. the Mauryas' or the Guptas'), we are dealing with a 'pre-state society'; when instead this same region becomes itself the centre of a political structure, then we are dealing with a 'state society'.[91] Such a conceptualisation perhaps betrays the influence of modern Indian politics: the importance of regionalisation/state society is acknowledged simply because it is closer to modern day Indian regional organisation.

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[88] See Susana B.C. Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity: Culture and Protest in Jharkhand* (New Delhi, 1992), pp. 49-76. Without subscribing *in toto* to her views, she puts forward the idea that 'tribe' is the creation of both European perception of Indian reality and administrative sanction by the colonial authority.

[89] B.D. Chattopadhyaya, "'Autonomous Spaces' and the Authority of the State: the Contradiction and its Resolution in Theory and Practice in Early India," B. Kölver ed., *Recht, Staat und Verwaltung in Klassichen Indien* (München, 1997), p. 1, footnote 2.

[90] B.D. Chattopadhyaya, "State and Economy in North India: Fourth Century to Twelfth Century," Romila Thapar ed., *Recent Perspectives of Early Indian History* (Bombay, 1995), p. 332; contrast the second with the third paragraph.

[91] Notably, such terminology is intrinsically vitiated and self-contradictory. The above hypothesis can in fact be falsified in its opposite and still remain valid. Thus according to Kulke we could say that as long as a region is the centre of a political structure (and, hence, a region) it is a 'pre-state society' (1st and 2nd phases of state formation); when the same region instead is within a major political structure (and is no longer a region) then it is a 'state society' (3rd phase of state formation)!

But 'tribal absorption' relates also and particularly to notions of Sanskritisation and Hinduisation, which as such betray an a-historical and stereotyped understanding of historical processes. It seems to me that in both the feudalism theory and the processual state model there is an undue hypostatisation of the concept of Hinduism to incorporate whatever happened in India from the time of the Vedas to the arrival of the Muslims. Hinduism itself is a historical product which comes into existence as a reaction to Buddhism and in structural relation to it. Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism are thus the *brāhmaṇical* and early medieval responses to the Buddhist hegemony of the early historical period and later. The same *purāṇic* narrative of the Kali age can be seen as one such response, i.e. the claim of displaced and old Vedic elites to a renewed political centrality. What Chattopadhyaya and Kulke seem thus to envisage in early medieval developments is not Hinduism's expansion but its creation. Hence Hinduism does not incorporate peripheral tribal people within the Sanskritic fold and local cults are not absorbed within the higher ritual Sanskritic tradition, simply because Hinduism does not exist before any 'tribal absorption' but it constitutes itself in the process.[92]

Regionalisation is thus the chief characteristic of the early medieval Indian state, a stage in the progressive and evolutional conception of the state Chattopadhyaya and Kulke have in mind. But such a comprehension is not comprehension at all. These scholars describe the state but do not explain it. Why should there be a state in the first place? While they rightly conceptualise a 'state society' in terms of integration, political or otherwise, they fail to supply it with a material base. Their argument becomes circular so that if socio-economic and religious changes are to be seen in parallel with political ones, it is the 'state society' which brings about changes in a region or community. The state becomes like "a catalyst in the historical process,"[93] it explains societal changes but remains itself without explanation.

The integrative and processual state eventually results in a metaphysical entity, an abstraction which crosses history without residing in it. The model is once again an attempt to bridge the gap between state and society. While Chattopadhyaya strives to

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[92] See Kunal Chakrabarti, "Texts and Traditions: The Making of the Bengal *Purāṇas*," R. Champakalakshmi and S. Gopal eds., *Tradition, Dissent and Ideology: Essays in Honour of Romila Thapar* (Delhi, 1996), pp. 55-88. Although the paper does not completely escape the concept of Sanskritisation, the author puts forward a nuanced and historicised notion of Hinduism. Sanskritisation is often equated to brahmanisation, but as far as Eastern India is concerned epigraphic evidence reveals the presence of brahmanical settlements from the 5th century AD. Literary evidence pushes back further the period of the 'Aryanisation' of Bengal. See Puspa Niyogi, *Brahmanic Settlements in Different Subdivision of Ancient Bengal* (Calcutta, 1967).

[93] Chattopadhyaya, "Introduction: The Making of Early Medieval India," p. 22.

link socio-economic and religious changes to political ones, in fact he ends up constituting them in a sort of parallelism[94] which coalesces in the separation of sacred and profane.[95] The presence of a 'trans-political ideology' in all early medieval state systems[96] is not sufficient to collapse the barriers between the political and religious domains. In fact Chattopadhyaya's 'trans-political ideology' becomes a religious ideology, the domain of the sacred. The function this ideology then performs is to legitimise the political claims of the profane. Strangely enough early medieval polities eventually appear to be established on the shaky foundations of non political means. It did not occur to Chattopadhyaya or to other scholars[97] that the 'trans-political ideology' he talks about could also be seen as a 'trans-religious' one, something which was both political and religious at the same time and which impinged on a social formation not as an external factor but as an internal constituent.

5. **The segmentary state**

The historiography of early medieval India has been enriched in the last 20 years by debates around the theory of the segmentary state. Although developed to explain the Southern Cōḷa state (950-1200 AD), the model has had a wide notoriety among scholars of early medieval North India and thus merits our attention.[98]

The segmentary conceptualisation of the early medieval South Indian state received its full formulation in 1980 when Burton Stein published his main work on the political organisation of South India from the Pallava to the Vijayanagara periods.[99] Borrowing the segmentary model from A.W. Southall's anthropological research on the Alur of Eastern Africa,[100] Stein approaches the voluminous evidence of the medieval South. The segmentary state is characterised by a dual kind of sovereignty: ritual sovereignty and political or 'real' sovereignty. While the source of ritual sovereignty is localised in one particular and principal centre, political sovereignty is actually

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[94] Chattopadhyaya, "Political Processes and Structure of Polity...," p. 202.
[95] *Ibid.*, p. 196.
[96] *Ibid.*, p. 195.
[97] See for instance Bhairabi Prasad Sahu, "Introduction" in Bhairabi Prasad Sahu ed., *Land System and Rural Society in Early India* (New Delhi, 1997), pp. 1-58.
[98] See Sharma, "How Feudal was Indian Feudalism," pp. 81-84; Chattopadhyaya, "Political Processes and Structure of Polity...," pp. 213-17.
[99] Burton Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (Delhi, first published 1980, paperback 1994). However, the segmentary concept has had a long prehistory a bibliographic review of which can be found in Kulke, "Introduction: The Study of the State...," pp. 18-20.
[100] Stein, *Peasant State and Society...*, p. 265.

exercised by all of the numerous centres making up the state. The various centres of political power are pyramidally hierarchised so that all of them exercise the same kind of executive authority, the difference being that higher centres have ritual competence over a wider territory and larger population. The pyramidal organisation thus implies that firstly, political authority has the same nature and extent in all the levels of the hierarchy; and secondly, administrative structures are not the monopoly of a primary centre but are themselves to be found replicated in all the units of the state.[101] Consequently, local areas do not constitute administrative units of the centre nor can local officers be considered administrators or bureaucrats proper.

The segmentary organisation of the state envisages three geographical areas or zones in which political sovereignty progressively decreases as we move away from the political centre. Thus a kingdom can be seen as the unity of central, intermediate and peripheral areas where political control shades off into and is replaced by ritual sovereignty the farther we move from the core area. This is the structure of a kingdom and can be found replicated, on a lesser scale, in all the segments of the same kingdom.[102] Instead of political integration, Stein identifies ritual integration as holding the state system together. Land charters, inscriptions and in general the religious policy of the Cōḷa kings were devised to support and help this integration which had as primary objective the spread of Cōḷa hegemony through the incorporation of all the localised cults and deities within the royal cult of Śiva.[103] In Cōḷa times the latter became "the keystone of the system of ritual hegemony."[104]

Despite Chattopadhyaya's labelling of Stein's segmentary formulation as a sort of "state *sans* politics"[105] the actual similarities between his conceptualisation of an 'integrative state' and Stein's segmentary one are remarkable. Instead of segmentarisation, Chattopadhyaya speaks of a '*sāmanta*-feudatory' system and while Stein lays stress on the constituent units of the segmentary state, Chattopadhyaya underlines integration as the key dynamic of the early medieval Indian state. Both then highlight the ritual and ideological incorporation of local cults and deities as an important element of state expansion. The central, intermediate and peripheral zones of Stein's formulation can in fact be easily made to correspond to Kulke's three phases of royal development or to Chattopadhyaya's local, supra-local and regional expansion.

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[101] These characteristics of the segmentary state can be found in a summarised form in *ibid.*, p. 274.
[102] *Ibid.*, p. 285.
[103] *Ibid.*, pp. 331; 352; 362; *passim*.
[104] *Ibid.*, p. 341.
[105] Chattopadhyaya, "Political Processes and Structure of Polity...," p. 214.

Admittedly, Stein does not mention tribal absorption, but this is because 'Aryanisation' in South India had already been accomplished in the centuries preceding the Cōḷas.[106] The affinities among these scholars are recognised by Stein himself who lucidly states "that a reconciliation of the views of Kulke and Chattopadhyaya with [his] own are possible as well as promising..."[107]

The reason behind such a possible reconciliation of views lies in the fact that both the segmentary and the processual states have as their corner-stone the separation between the domains of the sacred and the profane. Stein's conceptualisation of ritual and political sovereignty becomes thus the result of such a separation which is then nested in the supposed theoretical separation between *kṣatra* and *rājadharma* found in *dharmaśāstric* literature.[108] Apparently Stein borrows from R. Lingat who misconstrues the relationship between *kṣatra* and *dharma* in terms of opposition. Accordingly, *kṣatra* is "power of command" and *dharma* is "the mission to protect the creatures,"[109] which is then called *rājadharma*. *Kṣatra* implies "the right to act to suit himself without depending upon anyone else," *rājadharma* instead is "essentially a rule of interdependence, founded on a hierarchy corresponding to the nature of things and necessary for the maintenance of the social order."[110] The opposition between *kṣatra* and *rājadharma* is then further exemplified in that the former is "power of a territorial character, exercised within a given territory and stopping at the frontiers of the realm," while the latter is "a universal rule"[111] supposedly extending beyond the actual borders of the realm. Consequently Lingat concludes that "the king appears to owe his authority neither to divine will, nor to his birth, nor to any social compact, but solely to the force at his disposal (i.e. *daṇḍa*). [...] His authority is entirely temporal or secular."[112]

The secularisation of the king's role is also brought out forcefully by L. Dumont. He arrives at this idea by analysing the relationship between *brahman* and *kṣatra* the constituent elements of *brāhmaṇas* and *kṣatriyas*. The two embody and symbolise the spiritual and the temporal principles respectively which *per se* illustrate "the necessary

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[106] Stein, *Peasant State and Society...*, p. 331.
[107] Burton Stein, "The Segmentary State: Interim Reflections," H. Kulke ed., *The State in India: 1000-1700* (Delhi, 1995), p. 146.
[108] Stein, *Peasant State and Society...*, p. 267.
[109] Robert Lingat, *The Classical Law of India* (Berkeley, original French edition 1967, English edition 1973), p. 207.
[110] *Ibid.*, p. 211.
[111] *Ibid.*, p. 212.
[112] *Ibid.*, p. 215.

solidarity, distinction and hierarchy of the two functions."[113] Both Lingat and Dumont underline the non-sacral role of the Indian king, confining his competencies to the realm of the temporal. What in *dharmaśāstric* sources appears to refer to the divine nature of Indian kingship is explained away either as 'magico-religious' residuals[114] or as indicating not the sacrality of the king himself but of his function.[115]

Stein however does not go that far. While accepting Lingat and Dumont's oppositional conceptualisation of *kṣatra* and *dharma* he finds it 'puzzling' the stress that Lingat puts on the secular role of the king.[116] In a way Stein maintains the separation between *kṣatra* and *dharma*, political and ritual, secular and spiritual or profane and sacred but unifies the two in the agency of the king. An odd unification, as it will be shown below. If we then further consider that Stein's segmentary state consists of the ritual integration of various segments with a central sacral place, having the king standing at its core, we may conclude that the unification of the religious and political functions in the king's person is also the hierarchisation and subordination of the political to the religious.[117] Chattopadhyaya's critique of 'a state *sans* politics' may not be thus totally out of place! In fact, Stein's construct completely deprives the king of any 'real' political power outside his local area, and reduces his role *vis à vis* the kingdom to the purely sacral or ritual, and thus 'unreal'. Stein's king is powerless and his kingdom becomes a mere fiction. Real power resides in fact in local units (the segments).[118] Eventually, the king becomes a sort of figurehead who powerlessly presides over society, the actual site of political power. The latter, being based on kinship, is local in nature which makes the state a totally unnecessary and fictitious structure. Stein's segmentary formulation runs the risk of effectively constituting a stateless society. Thus, if, as I said above, Stein subordinates the political to the ritual, the secular to the sacred he does so only to show that ritual power is *not real*. The oddity of the unification of political and ritual sovereignties in the king's agency translates eventually in the depoliticisation of the king's role and hence of his kingdom.[119] However let us not

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[113] Louis Dumont, "The Conception of Kingship in Ancient India," L. Dumont, *Religion, Politics and History of India: Collected Papers in Indian Sociology* (Paris, 1970), p. 64. This paper was presented in two lectures at SOAS in October 1961.
[114] *Ibid.*, p. 73.
[115] Lingat, *The Classical Law of India*, p. 208.
[116] Stein, *Peasant State and Society...*, pp. 279-280.
[117] "[The] Hindu conception of monarchy was essentially sacred in the sense that kings were created by ritual and maintained through the moral authority engendered by ritual:" *ibid.*, p. 281.
[118] The real purport of Stein's segmentary model is clearly exposed by G.W. Spencer, *The Politics of Expansion: the Chola Conquest of Sri Lanka and Sri Vijaya* (Madras, 1983). He writes: "the royal role was primarily one of facilitation and validation of an essentially local arrangement...:" *ibid.*, p. 19.
[119] For the elaboration of this critique to Stein's model see Inden, *Imagining India*, pp. 206-11.

forget that both Chattopadhyaya and Stein keep the sacral and temporal separated. They differ only in their articulation of the two domains. Stein subordinates the political to the religious, dissolving in the process the kingdom as a political entity, while Chattopadhyaya keeps them strictly interrelated.[120]

Stein's formulation, besides the problem of empirically ascertaining where political sovereignty ends and where ritual sovereignty starts, seems to suffer thus from a more serious handicap. Similar to Chattopadhyaya's conception of 'trans-political ideology', the continued pervasiveness of religion/sacrality/rituality in the segmentary state remains unexplained and puzzling. If the ritual power of the king/kingdom is unreal in the sense that it cannot affect the political processes of the local power structures, why was there a king and a kingdom in the first place? Conversely, if local lords, assemblies, chiefdoms etc. are capable of operating autonomously from the ritual centre, why should they transact in 'ritual'? Indeed the postulate of a duality of sovereignty in medieval South Indian states is unsatisfactory. In the following chapters I will show that *kṣatra* and *Dharma/rājadharma* cannot be conceived as separate or, worse, as opposites. A king in early medieval India is such because *kṣatra* is his inner constituent, his *dharma*. But his *dharma* entails a particular and specific relationship with *Dharma* itself: the king is its protector and this protective function originates from his being a *kṣatriya*. Without a king and a kingdom, in fact, *Dharma* cannot exist. To distinguish thus the *dharma* of a *kṣatriya*/king or what makes him such (i.e. *kṣatra*) from *Dharma/rājadharma* or the universal norm may be analytically useful. This analytical distinction cannot however be construed as an empirical dichotomy. In a relatively recent paper Stein seems in fact to reconsider his previous understanding of the duality of sovereignty as entailed by Southall in his conception of segmentary state. He thus affirms that "in India the proposition is incorrect [...] lordship for Hindus always and necessarily combined ritual and political authority."[121] The statement represents a definitive improvement on his previous conceptualisation and theoretically bridges the gap between his and Chattopadhyaya's views on the topic. What is more, the measure of encompassment which both political and ritual sovereignty find in the concept of lordship may also bypass Chattopadhyaya's notion of legitimation as the

[120] Chattopadhyaya, "Political Processes and Structure of Polity...," p. 197.
[121] Stein, "The Segmentary State: Interim Reflections," p. 160.

process connecting political and religious domains.[122]

Concluding, we may certainly recognise Stein's remarkable effort in proposing a new conceptualisation of the medieval South Indian state. His attempt has definitively broken with the notion of a centralised and bureaucratic polity and highlighted at the same time the importance of cultural and ideological meanings in the construction and development of Indian kingship. However, the depoliticisation of the king effectively dissolves the kingdom as a politically meaningful entity. The secularisation of power *vis à vis* the spiritual domain in the local political structures reveals once again the persistence of a modern sociological construct which sees social formations as made up of two institutions, state and society. Stein is certainly aware of the modernist bias of much of Indian historiography[123] and indeed his segmentary formulation attempts to reverse it. But a centralised and anachronistic conception of the medieval Indian state cannot be dismissed by eliminating the state altogether. Its true rebuttal must also challenge the equally anachronistic concept of society which is construed as the theoretical and structural correlate of the state. Stein seems to fail here and his hypostatisation of the sacral may epitomise the persistence of a modern concept of society in the pre-modern context.

6. Towards a re-conceptualisation of the early medieval North-eastern Indian state

From the brief historiographical survey above, it is clear that a major limitation, exhibited in varying degrees by all the above mentioned scholars, consists in disembodying the early medieval state and reducing it to an a-historical abstraction. The state, thus, becomes variously a nationalist projection into the past, the victim of a feudal mode of production, the progressive development of an essence or a powerless entity, the result of a sacred/religious kind of kingship. In one way or another all the models highlight the importance of particular perspectives. I am convinced that Sharma's feudal mode of production, Chattopadhyaya's notion of integration and Stein's sacral kingship contribute significantly to our historical knowledge. However, the exclusive stress laid on one or the other of these aspects, risks misrepresenting the history these authors seek to comprehend and explicate. In this dissertation, I intend re-

[122] The argument here is tentative. Stein does not elaborate on his new formulation, and it is unclear if the convergence of ritual and political sovereignty means the collapse of the two domains into the all comprehensive category of lordship, or simply closes the previous gap between them, while maintaining their separation. From the context, the latter hypothesis seems more likely. See *ibid.*, pp. 159-61.
[123] See *ibid.*, p. 135.

reading available evidence in order to anchor the state in the total context of early medieval India. In so doing, I hope to show that the state was not a metaphysical entity travelling through history uninterrupted and unaffected by it. Borrowing from Otto Brunner's views on the European Middle Age, my analysis of the early medieval Indian state begins with the suggestion that the order in which it was embedded was not based "on the disjunctions between state and society, might and right, public and private."[124] The dissertation will use the more sophisticated concept of mode of production to explore and understand the early medieval reality. This approach will develop and substantiate the notion of lordship which I consider the key category for conceptualising early medieval social formations.

Despite the focus on mode of production, the approach here does not intend to further the by now traditional feudalist model of the early medieval state in general and of the Pāla polity in particular.[125] The term 'feudal' will be avoided for two reasons. First, the feudal concept is ambiguous in that it is usually taken to refer to a fragmented and decentralised polity. However, from a Marxist perspective, feudalism should characterise not a political structure but an economic one. Thus to say that a social formation was feudal does not necessarily mean that that social formation was politically decentralised or fragmented. Second and more importantly, the concept of feudal mode of production, as traditionally interpreted within the theory of Marxist historical materialism, may also be taken to imply a theory of history based on a quasi-evolutionary, mechanistic and teleological kind of development.

To understand the material at hand, I intend working with the concept of mode of production without however adopting the pre-given labels of ancient, feudal or Asiatic. There is no reason, in fact, for pre-capitalist modes of production to conform to set models and stages. Marx noted that the first and only mode of production that was universal and which brought all of mankind within one historical stream was capitalism. To expect *a priori* a 'feudal' mode of production in India in the manner of the European material, is therefore to falsely assume a universal *telos* of modes of

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[124] Otto Brunner, *Land and Lordship* (Philadelphia, 1st edition 1939, translated from the 1965 4th revised edition, 1992), p. xix.

[125] Sharma takes the Pāla state together with that of the Pratīhāras and the Rāṣṭrkūṭas to exemplify the rise of feudalism in North India; see his *Indian Feudalism*. See also R.S. Sharma, "Feudal Elements in Pala and Pratihara polity: A.D. 750-1000," *Studies in Asian History, Proceedings of the Asian History Congress 1961*, (London, 1969), pp. 332-41; R.S. Sharma, "Feudal Economy under the Pālas and Pratīhāras," *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly* XXVIII.1 (1962), pp. 68-83; Vijay Kumar Thakur, "Beginnings of Feudalism in Bengal," *Social Scientist* 6.6/7 (Jan.-Feb. 1978), pp. 68-82; Abu Imam, "Bengal in History," S.N. Mukherjee ed., *India: History and Thought, Essays in Honour of A.L. Basham* (Calcutta, 1982), pp. 71-83.

production before capitalism. This would constitute nothing short of Eurocentrism.

The concept of mode of production I intend employing builds on the elaboration of Hindess and Hirst:

> A mode of production is an articulated combination of relations and forces of production structured by the dominance of the relations of production. The relations of production define a specific mode of appropriation of surplus-labour and the specific form of social distribution of the means of production corresponding to that mode of appropriation of surplus-labour.[126]

Notably, the above definition allows for the articulation of several layers of human practice in one conceptual unity. Thus, the economic forces (i.e. forces of production) articulated by ideological ones (i.e. relations of production) determine the political mode of surplus extraction (i.e. mode of appropriation). If we leave aside its evident structuralist bias, the definition remains useful in that it affords a unified approach to the study of social formations and breaks with the modern dichotomy between state and society. Unlike traditional theoretical formulations in which "exploitation takes place externally to the process of production and after it has taken place,"[127] Hindess and Hirst strive to show that exploitation is not separated from the production process but is internal to it.[128] Thus the exploiting class enters the process of production and their exploitation is economic in nature. What differentiates one mode of production from another is only the different configuration and articulation of the economic, the ideological and the political instances. According to this model, the economic instance in all modes of production is 'determinant' while only in the capitalist mode of production does it become also 'dominant'. In pre-capitalist modes only is the 'dominant' instance other than the economic one. This neo-Althusserian terminology may perhaps sound confusing. The distinction between 'determinant' and 'dominant' instances refers to the articulation and functioning of a mode of production. Accordingly, the economic instance is 'determinant' in any mode of production simply because exploitation is always and necessarily economic in nature. In pre-capitalist modes of production, however, since the direct producers possess the means of production, economic exploitation takes place through non-economic means. This is the reason why in pre-capitalist modes of production, the 'dominant' instance is other than

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[126] Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst, *Pre-capitalist Modes of Production* (London, 1975), pp. 9-10.
[127] *Ibid.*, p. 234.
[128] *Ibid.*, p. 234.

the economic and why in the capitalist mode of production the 'determinant' and 'dominant' instances coincide: economic exploitation in fact takes place there through economic means. 'Determinant' and 'dominant' refer thus to the kind of exploitation and to the mode of that exploitation respectively.

Hindess and Hirst's formulation, however, needs to be further developed. Their definition of mode of production, in fact, remains too dependent on the definition of the Capitalist Mode of Production itself. In the latter, economy, ideology and politics are clearly separated and organised by the determinacy of the economic instance which, unlike in pre-capitalist modes of production, is also 'dominant'.[129] This conceptualisation seems thus to overlook the fact that the distinction and separation between economic, ideological and political instances are themselves the product of the Capitalist Mode of Production. In the latter, the direct producers must be juridically and politically free to enter the market and freely sell their labour, and this requires and presupposes institutions like the legal and political systems. In pre-modern social formations, however, the ambits of human practice are not constituted as independent and formal institutions, but are instead functions of one and the same reality. It is only with the benefit of hindsight that the historian can look back to the early medieval Indian period and discover analogies with modern sociological practice and knowledge. The neo-Althusserian as well as the Althusserian elaboration itself fail, thus, to produce viable categories for the analysis of pre-capitalist social formations, because of their ultimate grounding in the capitalist set-up. Althusserians do overcome the dichotomous hypostatisation and subordination of base and superstructure of classic Marxist interpretation,[130] but their variously elaborated 'unity of structural levels' seems to unduly simplify and misrepresent pre-capitalist polities. Diagram 1 graphically shows the 'unity of structural levels' of the Althusserian conceptualisation.[131] Notably, relations and forces of production are there situated in the economic instance. In early medieval India, however, the economic instance cannot be defined in separation from other instances.

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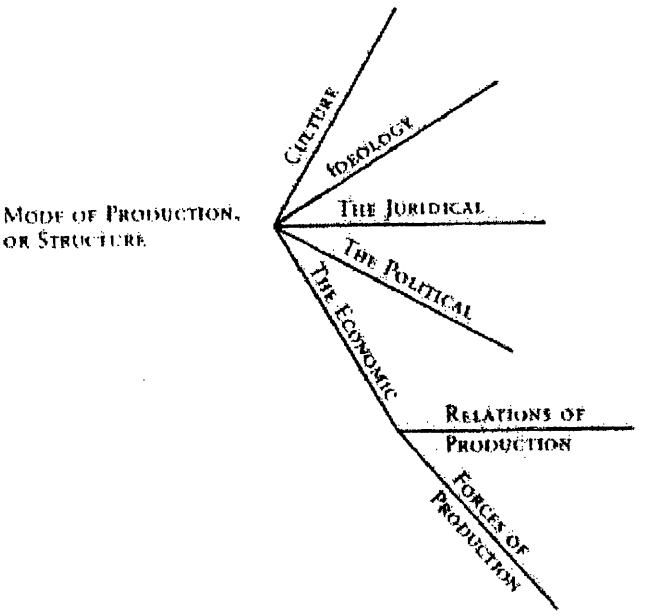
[129] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[130] L. Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London, 1971), pp. 121-73.

[131] Diagram 1 on the next page has been reproduced from Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (New York, 1981), p. 36.

Diagram 1

Althusser's Mode of Production



My own proposal then entails collapsing the 'instances' into an 'unarticulated' unity which itself corresponds to a concrete social formation. The concept of mode of production becomes then the rationale of that social formation, the discrete explanatory framework of its functioning. Consequently, the economic, religious/ideological and political instances are not constituted in formal domains but are seen as functions of the polity as a whole. This unitary view of a pre-capitalist polity does not imply, however, the hypostatisation of an amorphous and indistinct 'social mass'. On the contrary, the polities of early medieval North India were construed on and articulated by a *world-ordering rationality* which provided for the discrete operation of the various functions introduced above. That this world-ordering rationality was then dominated by 'religious categories' should not be identified *tout court* with the 'dominance of religion' of Hindess and Hirst. In the Indian context, the all important and exclusive place of so called 'religious categories' dissolves religion as we intend it since no other domain exists to differentiate it from. In short, the religious function is neither assumed by nor does it constitute the 'religious world-ordering rationality', but is one of the many functions that order provides for. This last remark is of crucial importance: in dealing with pre-capitalist categories, we must be aware of the different meanings which terms like *dharma* (religion) *artha* or *vartta* (economics) and *rājnīti* (politics) convey. While they maintain a semblance with modern usages and meanings, they do not have the

same meaning as religion, economy or politics do for us today. Specifically, the economic function is here requalified to include whatever is essential to the production and reproduction of the social formation. In this sense, ideological elements are included in its definition.[132] As a consequence, what we called the 'religious' world-ordering rationality could equally be recharacterised as 'economic' or 'political' without necessarily changing its meaning.

To apply the concept of mode of production to the complex reality of early medieval Indian polities is thus to introduce an analytical tool capable of discerning, 'underneath' the apparent dominance of 'religious categories', the economic, ideological and political functions that those categories fulfilled. Eventually, it will be shown that the stability of early medieval Indian social formations was related to the relative stability of embedded relations of productions.

For the above reasons, the all encompassing importance of 'religion' cannot authorise either the depoliticisation of Indian history or its dichotomous hypostatisation in the legitimation of political authority. On the contrary, religion cannot be depoliticised, and political power cannot be secularised. In early medieval India, power is religious and religion is power. And this is so because religion happened to articulate the relations of production; that is, it determined access to and control over the means of production and in so doing, also organised the process of production as well as the process of product distribution.[133] Once again we are forced to recognise that like other notions, the early medieval concept of 'religion' is different from the concept denoted by the same term today.

Lordship is the key category I take to embody and explicate the early medieval Indian mode of production. As such the notion is neither religious nor political nor economic, but all of them at the same time. Lordship is in fact a religious category in that it defines privileges on the basis of cosmic and theological views, but it is also a political and economic category for exactly the same reason. Religious privileges govern property relations and order relations of political subordination. Diagram 2 below synthetically shows the configuration of mode of production and lordship in early medieval India as I perceive it.

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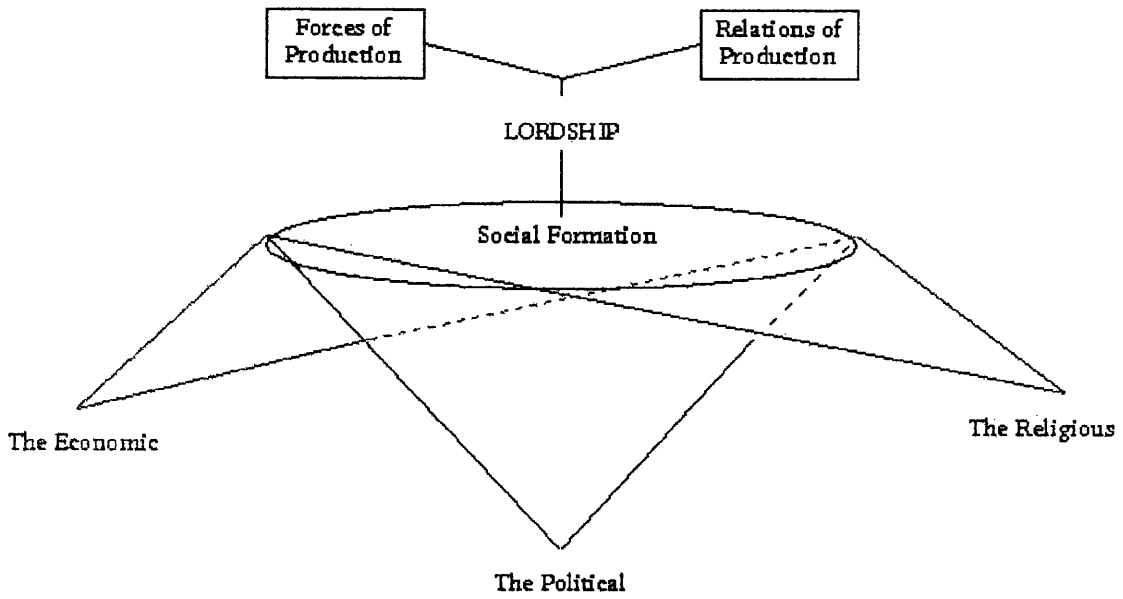
[132] Sayer writes: "...production cannot be conceived as a purely 'material' sphere, if material is taken to exclude social:" Sayer, *The Violence of Abstraction*, p. 25. Although I am not interested here in salvaging Karl Marx from historical oblivion, it may be noticed that Sayer qualifies his interpretative work as closer to the spirit of Marx's own thought.

[133] Maurice Godelier, *The Mental and the Material* (Thetford, Norfolk, 1986), p. 28.

Diagram 2

Social Formation, Mode of Production and Lordship



Consequently, the early medieval Indian state is here re-conceptualised on the basis of lordship. The state is not an entity within a social formation but it is that same social formation, the system which allowed social stratification and hence political relations of subordination. Lordship becomes the specific expression of political domination, the effective material anchor of Chattopadhyaya's trans-political ideology and of Stein's ritual sovereignty. Admittedly, J. Heitzman has already fruitfully attempted a similar articulation of lordship and mode of production in the context of the early medieval South Indian period. His argument will be duly referred to in the last chapter of this dissertation.

The conceptualisation of early medieval polities on the basis of lordship also allows for the redefinition of caste in politico-economic terms. Lordship in fact relocates the caste system within the Indian state not as the instrument of its own demise, but as its constituent element. R. Inden, developing the idea of citizenship which he then applies to caste, reaches a similar result. He argues that castes were on the one hand, the subjects of the king, and on the other, had citizen's status because of the degree of mastery which every *varṇa* exercised. Eventually he identifies the 'citizen body' of the kingdom with the *jānapada* (i.e. people and territory), one of the seven limbs of the

state according to ancient Indian political theory.[134] Apart from risking the 'resurrection' of civil society which both the concept of citizenship and the functioning of *jānapada* seem to evoke, Inden conceptualises domination in mere political terms. Lordship, on the contrary, offers the advantage to further ground Inden's political domination in economic considerations.

Whether the early medieval North-eastern Indian state was centralised or decentralised, territorially extended or not is extraneous to my endeavour. Early medieval polities can be assessed only on their actual ability to enforce particular world views with specific relations of production. And if the duration of a kingdom is a clue to the entrenchment of those relations of production, then the Pāla polity with more than four centuries of history was certainly a highly successful one.

[134] Inden, *Imagining India*, pp. 217-20.

CHAPTER TWO

Ownership of land and Lordship over Land: an Appraisal of Land Systems in Early Medieval North-eastern India

1. Introduction

An enquiry into the agrarian structures of early medieval North and North-eastern Indian social formations is of paramount importance in understanding the nature, organisation and manifestations of lordship in the period under study. To discern the economic template which determined the reproduction of a given society is also to discern the network of social relations of production which were both the cause and the result of that society's power structure.

Although the chapter offers a comparative analysis of agrarian structures of both the Gupta and Pāla polities, the main focus of the dissertation lies with the Pālas themselves. The choice of the Guptas for comparative purposes is guided by two considerations. On a more practical level, the Gupta social formation both in terms of spatial and temporal extension is comparable with that of the Pālas. In fact, what eventually became the Pāla kingdom was previously part and parcel of the Gupta formation. The numerous Gupta copper-plates of North-eastern India, then, permit the comparative analysis. On a more conceptual and important level, the choice responds to the way I understand the question of periodisation of Indian history. In nationalist historiography, as stated earlier, the Gupta period has often been characterised as the apex point of Indian/Hindu ancient civilisation. In feudalist historiography, although the Gupta period is recognised as a time of strong feudalisation, it is not included in the early medieval which is made to begin from the 6th century.[1] Apparently, the "seeming political unity"[2] of the Gupta empire disqualifies it from being labelled feudal, revealing meanwhile the persistent nationalist bias of many of the feudalist historians. But political unity has to be first demonstrated and in all cases cannot be considered as the sole criterion for periodisation, particularly when feudalisation is taken to distinguish the ancient from the medieval. Considering thus that from the Guptas onwards all major continental dynasties (except the Pālas) are 'Hindu' in apparent contrast to preceding Buddhist ones, I take this as the criterion which may help periodise Indian history. The hypothesis, therefore, is that the Guptas themselves represent and embody the transition from a Buddhist sort of polity to a Hindu one. The additional fact that the Pālas themselves were Buddhist, offers a particular view point on the whole period. This religious-based distinction, however, refers less to a change in 'religion' *per se* and

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[1] R.S. Sharma, "Problem of Transition from Ancient to Medieval in Indian History," *The Indian Historical Review* 1.1 (March 1974), pp. 2; 9.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

more to a change in political praxis which the different 'religions' articulated. For these reasons I accept the conventional denomination of 'early medieval' but enlarge it to also include the Guptas. They in fact started a system of socio-political and economic organisation which will be developed and reproduced time and again by subsequent dynasties.

This chapter demonstrates that from the Gupta period onwards land becomes increasingly important in the constitution of social formations. What is more, an analysis of epigraphic evidence from both the Pāla and Gupta polities reveals the great similarity and convergence between the agrarian systems of the two social formations. This in turn will allow us to suggest the existence of a unitary system of agrarian relations which spread through the whole of the early medieval period.

2. The Pāla land system

The dearth of sources compels us to literally squeeze out from Pāla inscriptions all the information we can possibly glean relating to the agrarian structure. Only from a close analysis of the kind of immunities granted, the items of income mentioned and the types of land transferred can we outline the framework of the Pāla land system.

Most of the Pāla charters grant villages or parts of them; only the Belwa copper-plate of Mahīpāla I grants three plots of land without any apparent reference to a village.[3] The remaining 14 royal charters transferred a total of 18 villages, one town, Nandadīrghikā, and parts of 5 other villages. Despite differences in the actual size of the gifts, the conditions under which the donees enjoyed their respective gift-land were very much the same in all of the grants. In fact the sections dealing with these conditions can be found repeated in almost all the charters in the following stereotyped form:

> Be it known to you [i.e. the officers and villagers mentioned before] that this village mentioned above, as far as its boundaries and with grass lands and pasture lands, with low lands, with assignments, with mango and *Madhūka* trees, with land and water, with pits and highlands, with the ten offences, with the right of extirpating robbers, with exemption from all interference, not to be entered by regular or irregular troops, not to be interfered with by anybody, with all shares, rights of easement, taxes,

[3] D.C. Sircar, "Two Pala Plates from Belwa," *Epigraphia Indica* (*EI*) XXIX (1951-52), pp. 1-9.

(rights of mining) gold, etc. by the law of *bhūmichchidra*, as long as the sun, moon and earth shall last; [...] has been granted by us...[4]

In order to better understand the extension, quality and number of privileges granted and the conditions of the grants themselves I propose to unpack the original Sanskrit formula and analyse its content under three categories: types of land, immunities and sources of income.

2.1 **The types of land**

The passage opens mentioning the extent of the village granted, said to include "its grass and pasture lands" (*sva-sīmā-tṛṇayūti-gocara-paryanta*).[5] The expression seems to indicate that a village was delimited by an area employed as pasture land and grazing field for cattle. The word *yūti* is difficult to translate. It might have meant "small plant or shrubs."[6] As it stands the formula might denote the contiguity between the inhabited area of the village and its arable land.[7] Sometimes in inscriptions terms like *gomārga*,[8] *gopatha* and *govata* are found. They would indicate the paths which linked villages and the pasture lands on their borders used by cattle. The difficulty of the expression is however compounded by the fact that in the Mungir plate of Devapāla it is followed by *sa-tṛṇa*, "with its grass."[9] The expression "with low lands" (*sa-tala*) comes next. D.C. Sircar renders it as "together with the surface of the land."[10] It is indeed difficult to understand the real purport of the Sanskrit terms. The same may be said of the following qualification "with high lands" (*s-oddeśa*). That is the usual way in which the expression is translated, particularly when it is preceded by *tala*. Sircar, however seems to propose a different rendering. According to him *s-oddeśa* means "together with the space above the surface," clearly linking the term to his suggested understanding of *tala*.[11] "Mango and Mahua trees" (*s-āmra-madhūka*) lying within the perimeter of the

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[4] R.D. Banerji, "The Amgachhi Grant of Vigraha-Pala III: The 12th Year," *EI* XV (1919-20), pp. 300-1.
[5] *Ibid.*
[6] Kamrunnesa Islam, *Aspects of Economic History of Bengal: c. 400-1200 A. D.* (Dhaka, 1984), p. 67.
[7] That the term 'village' (*grāma*) may have been used in the sense of 'agricultural land' can be seen in the Belwa plate of Mahipāla I; see footnote 16 below. For the structure of early North-eastern Indian village settlements see B.D. Chattopadhyaya, *Aspects of Rural Settlements and Rural Society in Early Medieval India* (Calcutta, 1990), p. 18ff.
[8] F. Kielhorn, "Khalimpur Plate of Dharmapaladeva," *EI* IV (1896-97), p. 249, line 43.
[9] Lionel D. Barnett, "The Mungir Plate of Devapaladeva: Samvat 33," *EI* XVIII (1925-26), p. 306, line 39.
[10] D.C. Sircar, *Landlordism and Tenancy in Ancient and Medieval India as Revealed by Epigraphical Records* (Lucknow, 1969), p. 73.
[11] *Ibid.*

donated village are included in the gift-land. Only in one of the Pāla charters do we find a reference to another kind of tree: the *yaggña.*[12] "With water and land" (*sa-jala-sthala*) seems to refer to the two natural elements, but its real significance remains elusive. The last item in the list is "with pits" (*sa-gart-oṣara*). The expression is made up of *garta* and *uṣara*, 'hole' and 'barren' respectively. Sircar thus renders it as "together with pits and barren land."[13] Sometimes additional specifications are found. In the Manahali copper-plate of Madanapāla, for instance, "together with shrubs and branches"[14] (*sa-jhāṭa-viṭapa*)[15] is added. These were possibly employed by villagers as domestic fuel.

Dealing almost exclusively with villages,[16] it is obvious that the grants list a series of land types which were normally to be found in an average village settlement. The only land which is not mentioned is the one which the donee would cherish most: agricultural or arable land.[17] This single omission allows us to infer that the above mentioned stipulation, technically called *parihāras* or privileges, does not intend on providing a comprehensive catalogue of the various lands types included in a village, but merely reinforces the totality and comprehensiveness of the grant being made. It does so by mentioning trees, pasture lands, pits, water, shrubs and so on. *Arable land, the economic heart of the grant, was presupposed.* Not so the other elements. Some of them may have been used by villagers as a whole; others may have yielded specific revenue for the king. Whatever the case, it is evident that the land grant involved the whole of the village economy. This of course had important consequences for the relations between recipients of grants and village peasantry.

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[12] K.V. Ramesh and S.S. Iyer, "Māldā District Museum Copper-plate Charter of Mahendrapāladeva," Year 7," *EI* XLII (1977-78), p. 22, line 46.
[13] Sircar, *Landlordism and Tenancy...*, p. 73.
[14] *Ibid.*.
[15] N.N. Vasu, "The Manahali Copper-plate Inscription of Madanapāladeva," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (*JASB*) LXIX (1900), p. 72, line 40.
[16] Interestingly, in spite of the fact that in the Belwa grant of Mahīpāla I the object of the donation is represented by three plots of land, the conditions of the donee's enjoyment of the same are expressed in the same way as in other grants dealing with villages. Actually the three plots in the corresponding section of the charter are referred to as *tri-grāmāḥ*. *Grāmaḥ* must then refer to agricultural land as well as 'village'. See Sircar, "Two Pala Plates from Belwa," *EI* XXIX, p. 8, line 41.
[17] Only in one charter do we find mentioned *sva-saṃvaddha-bhūmi-sameta* (together with its land): see Ramesh and Iyer, "Māldā District Museum Copper-plate Charter of Mahendrapāladeva," Year 7," *EI* XLII, p. 22, line 45.

2.2 The immunities attached to granted land

In all the 14 copper-plates of the dynasty we come across terms which imply the concession of 'special immunities', or what might more helpfully be generically termed 'faculties and exemptions'. These were conceded to the donee as part of the grant itself. The first two of these seem to refer directly to the faculties of dealing "with cases involving the ten offences" (*sa-daś-āparādha* or *sa-daś-āpacāra*), and of "apprehending and punishing thieves" (*sa-caurodharaṇa*) respectively.[18] Some authors argue that these privileges did not entail judicial powers, which remained with the king, but the fines and income accruing from such judicial activity. These might have been of two sorts: the fines exacted from criminals and the revenue extracted from the villagers as a kind of police tax.[19] This view relies on the consideration that almost all of the donees were *brāhmaṇas*, traditionally forbidden from meddling in political affairs. But other epigraphic evidence indicates that this was not always the case.[20] This point has vital implications for the feudal tenet of political fragmentation. Indeed, donees may have exercised judicial authority in their donated land without endangering, at the same time, the political coherence of the kingdom. Donated lands, in fact, continued to enjoy the king's protection. It is, therefore, conceivable that the king's coercive apparatus may have constituted the instrument of donees' judicial activity. Against the notion of fragmentation, the authority of donees cannot be construed as opposed to or curtailing that of the donor. The point will become clearer below.

Often but not always *sa-daś-āparādha* is preceded by another immunity: *sa-uparikara*.[21] Sircar renders it as "with the tax from temporary tenants."[22] In many non-Pāla charters *uparikara* is found together with *udraṅga* meaning "fixed taxes assessed

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[18] Sircar, *Landlordism and Tenancy...*, p. 73.

[19] Islam, *Aspects of Economic History of Bengal...*, pp. 179-81. See also Abhay Kant Choudhary, *Early Medieval Village in North-eastern India: A. D. 600-1200* (Calcutta, 1971), pp. 221-24.

[20] An inscription of the time of the Gāhaḍavāla king Jayaccandra dated to the Vikrama-saṃvat 1230 (i.e. 1173 A D) refers to an ordinance issued by the *brāhmaṇas* of a village, without any reference to the reigning king, and decreeing the death of some people guilty of certain crimes. Quoted in D.C. Sircar, *Studies in the Political and Administrative Systems in Ancient and Medieval India* (Delhi, reissued 1995), pp. 82-83.

[21] The expression is to be found in six charters: Barnett, "The Mungir Plate of Devapaladeva: Samvat 33," *EI* XVIII, p. 306, line 39; P.N. Bhattacharyya, "Nalanda Plate of Dharmapaladeva," *EI* XXIII (1935-36), p. 292, line 18; E. Hultzsch, "The Bhagalpur Plate of Narayanapala," *The Indian Antiquary* (*IA*) XV (1886), p. 306, line 42; R.C. Majumdar and P.N. Misra, "The Jājilpārā Grant of Gopāla II, Year 6," *Journal of the Asiatic Society. Letters* (*JAS.L*) XVII.2 (1951), p. 143, line 32; Ramesh and Iyer, "Māldā District Museum Copper-plate Charter of Mahendrapāladeva," Year 7," *EI* XLII, p. 22, lines 45-46; D.C. Sircar, "Lucknow Museum Copper-plate Inscription of Surapala I, Regnal Year 3," *EI* XL (1973), p. 15, line 61.

[22] Sircar, "Two Pala Plates from Belwa," *EI* XXIX, p. 5, footnote 3.

on permanent tenants."[23] Thus *uparikara* would refer to a tax levied on tenants with no proprietary rights, while *udraṅga* to a tax on tenants with proprietary rights. However, this interpretation is not convincing. In the Pāla grants, in fact, *udraṅga* does not appear, so that we may take *uparikara* literally as "a type of extra or super tax."[24] The land granted was then qualified as "free from all obstructions and molestation" (*parihṛita-sarva-pīḍa*). *Viṣṭi* or forced labour is generally considered among the obstructions from which the land is declared free. We may learn what other kinds of molestation might have been from two contemporary charters from Assam: the Gauhati copper-plate of Indrapāla and the Bangaon copper-plate of Ratnāpāla. Here we find that lands were given free from all worries "on account of the fastening of elephants, the fastening of boats, the searching for thieves, the inflicting of punishments etc."[25] These probably referred to various inconveniences suffered by villagers whenever a royal party visited the place. Whatever these obstructions might have been, it is clear that this kind of immunity applied to the donee and not to the villagers. Only the donee was assured peace from molestation, which meant that he himself was free to impose his own kind of molestation. The last of the immunities to be mentioned referred to "freedom from the entry of regular and irregular troops" (*a-cāṭa-bhāṭa-praveśa*). Sircar is more specific: "the Bhāṭas appear to have been policemen, watchmen and peons, and Cāṭa the leader of a group of them."[26] It appears that because of their royal mandate they had a free hand with the villagers. That they were feared is clear from Vijñāneśvara's commentary on the Yājñavalkya *smṛti*: "people should be protected from the sufferings caused by the *cāṭas*, *taskaras*, *kāyasthas* etc."[27]

This set of immunities reinforces the idea that the land granted was completely in the hands of the donee. The economic hold on the land is here stressed by the inclusion of faculties and immunities. The latter in fact were not attached to the land as such but to the person holding it.[28] The grant, thus, not only constitutes the grantee as the new owner but also as the new lord of the gifted land. Lordship, a higher form of ownership, implied judicial activity and political control in general. The peasantry is not freed from economic and judicial constrains but simply finds a change in their source:

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[23] Sircar, *Landlordism and Tenancy...*, p. 62.
[24] Choudhary, *Early Medieval Village in North-eastern India...*, p. 133.
[25] Quoted in Islam, *Aspects of Economic History of Bengal...*, p. 60.
[26] Sircar, *Studies in the Political and Administrative Systems...*, p. 179.
[27] Quoted in Choudhary, *Early Medieval Village in North-eastern India...*, p. 117
[28] Sircar writes: "It seems that even when the holder of a revenue-free estate was allowed to sell his property, usually, it no longer remained rent-free, so that the purchaser would become a rent-paying subject to the king:" *Landlordism and Tenancy...*, p. 27. This point will be taken up again below.

previous to the grant these came from the king or whoever acted in his place; afterwards from its new master.

2.3 The items of income

The rights acquired by the donee obviously included exemption from a series of revenue items which the village had no longer to pay the king. Of course, this exemption was at the same time a right. In fact, the donee as the new landlord was now entitled to that income. In most of the Pāla grants these exemptions are typically rendered as "with all shares, rights of easements, taxes, (rights of mining) gold etc." (*a-kiñcit-pragrāhya samasta-bhāgabhogakara-hiraṇy-ādi-pratyāya-sameta*). This translation however, can be improved upon. If we understand the latter part of the Sanskrit expression as an exemplification and qualification of the former, then the land given is described as "completely free from taxes" (*a-kiñcit-pragrāhya*) "together with such dues as the *bhāgabhogakara-hiraṇya* and others." The mention of this particular kind of revenue allows us to infer that *bhāgabhogakara-hiraṇya* was possibly the bulk or the most important form of royal income (*pratyāya*) of the time. Unfortunately, as for many other terms, scholars are not unanimous in the interpretation of the compound *bhāgabhogakara*.[29] While separately the three words are well known in Indian legal literature, their compounding is unknown. An additional difficulty is that the compound, though common in all the post 8th century charters from North-eastern India, is often found in different forms. For instance, in the charters of the Candra, Varman and Sena kings, the word *bhāga* is omitted. Even in some of the earlier Pāla charters the complete compound is not found.[30] This again points to the illustrative nature of the expression. Whatever the exact meaning the compound may have we may however gather an idea of the discrete meaning of its elements. *Bhāga* seems to have indicated the king's grain share. This was the principal income from agricultural land.

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[29] Kamrunnesa Islam writes: "Keilhorn and Ghoshlal accept the term as a single expression and explain it as the usual share of the king in grain. On the other hand, in the opinion of A.S. Alteker, the term should be split into two, *bhāgakara* being the land tax and *bhogakara*, in theory, consisting of miscellaneous small taxes paid in kind to the king every day, but in practice usually assigned to local officers. Fleet suggests that the term *bhāgabhoga* may perhaps be considered as one fiscal expression, meaning, enjoyment of taxes for its literal meaning is enjoyment of shares:" *Aspects of Economic History of Bengal...*, p. 168.

[30] In these charters the word *kara* alone is used, and instead of *bhāgabhoga* the term *piṇḍaka*, rendered as 'payments in kind' is employed; Kielhorn, "Khalimpur Plate of Dharmapaladeva," *EI* IV, p. 250, line 55; Ramesh and Iyer, "Māldā District Museum Copper-plate Charter of Mahendrapāladeva," Year 7," *EI* XLII, p. 22, line 48. In the Mungir plate, however, *piṇḍaka* is not used and it is replaced instead with the word *hiraṇya*; Barnett, "The Mungir Plate of Devapaladeva: Samvat 33," *EI* XVIII, p. 306, line 45.

Traditionally the king's share of the produce was fixed at one sixth, though other proportions are known.[31] In Pāla times we do not know what this share amounted to. We may have a clue from the mention in one of the Pāla grants of an officer called 'superintending the sixth' as the etymology of the word *ṣaṣṭhādhikṛta*[32] seems to indicate. This officer may have been in charge of the collection of the king's share in terms of a sixth of the produce.[33] *Bhoga* is variously explained. "According to Medhātithi and Kullūka this tribute consisted of daily presents to the king in the form of flowers, fruits, vegetables, grass etc."[34] Sircar more generically defines it as "periodical offerings."[35] Alone, *kara* denoted "revenue or taxes in general."[36] When instead it is compounded with *bhāgabhoga*, it must have referred to a kind of land revenue over and above the customary grain share.[37] *Hiraṇya* is the last of the revenue terms appearing in the Pāla charters. Literally the word refers to gold. It is however unlikely that villagers had gold coins to pay revenue, particularly when neither the Pālas nor the Senas are known to have minted any gold currency. It is instead plausible that such a tribute was payable in cash. Cowries would have provided the medium for such a payment. Other authors, however, considering the fact that the term appears in the context of land revenue, contend, very anachronistically, that this tribute was a kind of income tax.[38]

Whatever the exact meanings of the terms discussed above, it should be clear that the Pāla land grants transferred land with all that possibly was on, in, above, and underneath it. The donee was endowed with sweeping powers and privileges so that nothing in the life of a village was beyond his reach. Arable land was the bulk of the donation but other types of land and resources were also included. In one charter besides the customary immunities outlined above, even fish (*mātsya*) was included

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[31] Manu indicates the king's grain share at "an eighth, or a sixth, or a twelfth, of crops," W. Doniger and B.K. Smith tr., *The Laws of Manu* (London, 1991), VII.130. Nārada (c. 100-300 AD) specifies one-sixth of the produce: *Nārada*, XVIII.48, quoted in S.K. Maity, *Economic Life in Northern India in the Gupta Period* (Delhi, 1970), p. 78. The *Garuḍa Purāṇa* (c. 850-1000 AD) also maintains the one-sixth ratio, as does the *Agni Purāṇa* (c. 900-1500 AD): quoted in Choudhary, *Early Medieval Village in North-eastern India...*, p. 131.

[32] Kielhorn, "Khalimpur Plate of Dharmapaladeva," *EI* IV, pp. 249-50, lines 44-45.

[33] This kind of evidence is however inconclusive: the title may indeed have referred to the office of a share collector, but the actual amount of crop collected could have varied. In other words, the title might have been used in a conventional way.

[34] Choudhary, *Early Medieval Village in North-eastern India...*, p. 132. Both commentators make this point clear when commenting on *Manu* VIII.207.

[35] Sircar, *Landlordism and Tenancy...*, p. 15. More references to the meaning of *bhoga* can be found in Islam, *Aspects of Economic History of Bengal...*, pp. 170-71.

[36] Sircar, *Landlordism and Tenancy...*, p. 16. See footnote 30 above.

[37] Islam, *Aspects of Economic History of Bengal...*, p. 173.

[38] *Ibid.*, pp. 174-75, for a full treatment of the different interpretations of *hiraṇya*.

among the *parihāras* enjoyed by the donee.[39] These privileges extended into the judicial sphere too. The new master was not only a *landowner* but a *landlord* with the authority to adjudicate criminal cases. But what really indicates the kind of primacy the donee was to enjoy within the donated land is the sheer number of economic privileges apportioned to him. Many of them are mentioned in the grants but these are only illustrative of the general principle: "completely free from taxes" (*a-kiñcit-pragrāhya*). The donee is totally exempted from paying any sort of revenue.

The same, however, cannot be said of the peasants living and working in the donated villages. The charters make it clear that exemptions concern only the new master. In fact in most of the Pāla grants we find the following expression "...and the resident cultivators, being ready to obey our commands, should make over (*to the donees*) the customary taxes, means of subsistence, and all other kinds of revenue."[40] This leaves little doubt that the grant did not alter the condition of the peasantry. The measure of economic subjection of the gifted land may be further understood if we also consider the number of non-agrarian resources which came under the control of the donee and the kind of land tenure he was gifted with. In the Khalimpur charter, Dharmapāla grants four villages "*haṭṭikā-talapāṭaka sametā*,"[41] i.e. together with *haṭṭikā* and *talapāṭaka*. While the meaning of the latter term remains elusive, the former seems to refer to market dues,[42] apparently revenue enjoyed by the king from transactions in market places (*haṭṭa*). In addition, from the lists of officers mentioned in the royal inscriptions we come to know of a *śaulkika*, a *tarika* and a *gaulmika*.[43] The *śaulkika* was possibly in charge of the collection of *śulka*, tolls and customs duties imposed on articles brought to the markets.[44] *Tarika* may instead be equated with "the official mentioned by Medhātithi, who exacted taxes (*tara*) on goods at the crossing of the river."[45] We do not know if behind the term *gaulmika* another tax may be hidden. *Gulma* in Sanskrit means a wood, fort or guard of soldiers. In its first meaning the term *gaulmika* might indicate a superintendent of woods and forests. Whatever the case, it seems doubtless that the Pāla land-economy was tightly controlled. Not only were

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[39] *sa-mātsya*: Barnett, "The Mungir Plate of Devapaladeva: Samvat 33," *EI* XVIII, p. 306, line 39.

[40] *prativāsibhiḥ kṣetrakaraiś=ch=ājñāśravaṇa-vidheyair=bhūtvā samuchita-kara-piṇḍak-ādi-sarvva-pratyāy-opanayaḥ karyā iti*: Kielhorn, "Khalimpur Plate of Dharmapaladeva," *EI* IV, p. 250, lines 55-56; translation p. 254.

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 250, lines 51-52.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 254, footnote 5.

[43] See among others Banerji, "The Amgachhi Grant of Vigraha-Pala III: The 12th Year," *EI* XV, p. 297, lines 28-30.

[44] Islam, *Aspects of Economic History of Benga...*, p. 141.

[45] Md. Aquique, *Economic History of Mithila* (New Delhi, 1974), p. 69.

agrarian resources in the hands of the king and/or the donees but the same pattern of control was repeated with non agrarian goods and services: movements of merchandise and transactions in general were equally subject to excise.

As far as the kind of tenure under which land was donated is concerned, all the Pāla charters and, indeed, most of the post 8th century Indian charters, refer to it with the law of *bhūmicchidra* (*bhūmicchidranyāya*). This law refers to "the custom of allowing a person who brings a piece of fallow or jungle land under cultivation to enjoy it without paying rent."[46] In fact the expression is but a legal fiction to signify that the land being transferred will not be subjected to any taxation.[47] From the context where it occurs it seems that *bhūmicchidranyāya* actually referred to "permanent heritable land tenureship"[48] and that it was a permanent endowment is clear from what usually follows the expression in inscriptions: "as long as the sun, moon and earth shall last,"[49] so long shall the gift endure.

The picture outlined above indicates the need to situate these practices in a societal framework very different from the one we are accustomed to. The number and extension of what standard historiography calls taxes were excessive even for those days. So much so that what we are used to interpreting as taxation was possibly not taxation at all. It may well be that the economic subjection of land and peasants to both the king and/or the donee was the result of a relationship which was something different from that existing between a modern state and its citizens. The Pāla land charters call into question our definition of state, and require at the same time a discussion of the concept of ownership. But before entering these vexed questions let us now turn to the Gupta polity.

3. **The Gupta land system**

The importance attributed to the Gupta empire in historiography can hardly be overstated. On the one hand the Gupta period is taken as a fixed point in the periodisation of Indian ancient history marking the end of the ancient period and the

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[46] Sircar, "Two Plates from Belwa," *EI* XXIX, footnote 3, p. 5.
[47] Sharma has emphasised this point frequently; see, for instance, his *Indian Feudalism: c. 300-1200* (Calcutta, 1965), pp. 36-38. References to *bhūmicchidra* in *śāstric* literature can be found in Sircar, *Landlordism and Tenancy...*, p. 5.
[48] Islam, *Aspects of Economic History of Bengal...*, p. 92.
[49] *ā-chandr-ārka-kṣithi-sama-kālam*: Banerji, "The Amgachhi Grant of Vigraha-Pala III: The 12th Year," *EI* XV, p. 297, lines 34-35.

beginning of the early medieval one. On the other hand, the Gupta period is generally seen as the cultural and political apex of ancient Indian civilisation. In this respect, it is often considered the golden age of Indian history. Here, however, I am merely interested in the land system which was operative in Gupta times. Like the Pālas, the agrarian structure of the Gupta polity is accessible only through epigraphic material. The topic will be developed in three stages. First, I will try to lay out the land system in the territories directly subjected to the Gupta monarchs. Second, the same analysis will be attempted in the territories of rulers somehow affiliated to the Guptas. Finally, I will give particular attention to the Gupta land charters from eastern India.

3.1 The land system in the territories directly subjected to the Gupta kings

Surprisingly enough, the Gupta emperors themselves seem to have engaged neither massively nor directly in issuing land grants. Much of their epigraphic material consists of poetic compositions eulogising their military exploits, prowess and fame. Among the few inscriptions dealing with actual donations of land are two copper-plates of Samudragupta (335-375 AD) generally considered spurious by many authors,[50] and two epigraphs of Skandagupta (455-467 AD) engraved on a pillar and on a rock respectively. In the Gayā copper-plate[51] Samudragupta grants the village of Revatikā in the Gayā *viṣaya* to the *brāhmaṇa* Gopasvāmin. The village is said to be given with the assignment of *uparikara* (*s-oparikara*), a term encountered above and translated hypothetically as immunity from 'extra cess'. Also of interest is the instruction given to the village officers and *brāhmaṇas* to hand over to the donee "all the customary tributes of the village, consisting of that which is to be measured; gold (*hiraṇya*) etc."[52] No other specific immunities or privileges are mentioned. The grant in addition imposes on the donee a condition somehow limiting his mastery. The donee is in fact expressly prohibited from introducing tax paying cultivators and artisans from other villages to the rent-free village (*agrahāra*). The impression is that the charter does transfer the totality of the village to the donee, but unlike the Pāla charters it seems to concentrate

[50] Fleet and Sircar among others declared the two plates spurious on the basis of orthographic and grammatical points. Other scholars, however, consider them authentic. D.R. Bhandarkar in his revised edition of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* (*CII*) volume III, propounds the possible authenticity of the two plates. See his introductions to both the "Gayā Copper-plate Inscription of Samudragupta: The Year 9," and the "Nālandā Copper-plate Inscription of Samudragupta: the Year 5," *CII* III (1981), pp. 224-31.
[51] See Bhandarkar, "Gayā Copper-plate Inscription of Samudragupta: The Year 9," *CII* III (1981), pp. 228-31.
[52] *Ibid.*, p. 230, lines 11-12.

mainly on pecuniary aspects of the village economy. Land as such does not appear to receive the same interest and importance as in the Pāla grants.

In the Bihar stone pillar inscription,[53] Skandagupta seems to endow a *brāhmaṇa* with a *grāma-kṣetra*. Unfortunately, the inscription is badly damaged and cannot be properly read. From the words *akṣaya-nīvī*,[54] it is however certain that the donation was a perpetual one. *Nīvī* has been variously explained but seems to indicate "the fixed capital out of the interest on which a particular expense is to be met."[55] Applied to land and qualified by *akṣaya* (indestructible, and hence permanent) the expression would refer to both its perpetual character and its non-transferability. In this fragmentary inscription we come to know also of the names of some officers: the *āgrahārika*, the *śaulkika* and the *gaulmika*.[56] The first would supervise the *agrahāra* villages, which despite our poor evidence must have been considerable in number, if a supervisor was required. The *śaulkika* and the *gaulmika* as we have already seen in the Pāla inscriptions, indicate a collector of customs and tolls, and a superintendent of woods and forests respectively. In the Bhitari stone pillar inscription[57] of the same Skandagupta, another village is donated to an image of the god Viṣṇu. Although *Akṣaya-nīvī* is not found here, the perpetuity of the grant is rendered with reference to the duration of the sun and the stars.[58] Other conditions are not mentioned.

The lack of details relating to land and revenue do not seem to indicate that these grants were less comprehensive in their purport than the later Pāla grants; instead it may well be that in this period movable wealth was more valuable and appreciated than immovable one. In this respect it may be noticed that in Gupta eulogies the king Samudragupta is often portrayed as having been the giver "of many millions of lawfully acquired cows and gold."[59] Land here does not appear as an item of donation. In inscriptions not issued from the Gupta court but located in the core area of their direct control (i.e. parts of modern Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar), pecuniary donations are to be found more often than land donations. In the Sanchi stone

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[53] J.F. Fleet, "Bihar Stone Pillar Inscription of Skandagupta," *CII* III (1888), pp. 47-52.
[54] *Ibid.*, p. 50, line 26.
[55] Maity, *Economic Life in Northern India in the Gupta Period*, p 38. Different interpretations of the term *nīvī* can be found on previous pages.
[56] Fleet, "Bihar Stone Pillar Inscription of Skandagupta," *CII* III (1888), p. 50, line 29.
[57] J.F. Fleet, "Bhitari Stone Pillar Inscription of Skandagupta," *CII* III (1888), pp. 52-56.
[58] *Ibid.*, p. 54, line 18.
[59] J.F. Fleet, "Mathura Stone Inscription of Chandragupta II," *CII* III (1888), p. 26, line 4. See also "Allahabad Posthumous Stone Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta," p. 8, line 25; "Bilsad Stone Pillar Inscription of Kumaragupta; the Year 96," p. 43, line 2; "Bihar Stone Pillar Inscription of Skandagupta," p. 50, line 16; Bhandarkar, "Nālandā Copper-plate Inscription of Samudragupta: the Year 5," *CII* III (1981), p. 227, line 2.

inscription[60] of the time of Chandragupta II, a certain Amrakārdava, an officer of Chandragupta II, donates the village of Iśvaravāsaka and 25 *dīnāras* to the Kākanādaboṭa monastery (*vihāra*). The village was purchased with money received, seemingly, from the sale of some royal residences. This endowment was perpetual as the imprecatory verses at the end of the inscription testify. In the Indor copper-plate inscription[61] of the time of Skandagupta the *brāhmaṇa* Devaviṣṇu endows a temple of the Sun god with an amount of money whose interest is to be spent on the maintenance of a lamp for the temple-god. The endowment was perpetual and is handed over to the guild of oil-men, a guild which was also the proprietor of the same temple.

3.2 **The land system in territories under Gupta suzerainty**

The scenario which comes out of the inscriptions issued by kings purportedly Gupta under-lords[62] is, by contrast, considerably different. From epigraphs we come to know of three major dynasties: the Parivrājakas, the Ucchakalpas and the Vākāṭakas. The former two dynasties ruled over areas of modern Northern Madhya Pradesh, while the latter's power base embraced parts of southern Madhya Pradesh and North-eastern Maharashtra.

In the Khoh copper-plate of the year 156 (474-475 AD),[63] the *mahārāja* Hastin of the Parivrājaka dynasty grants the *brāhmaṇas* Gopasvāmin and others the village Vasuntarasaṇḍika. Its boundaries are given together with a number of privileges consisting of *udraṅga*, *uparikara* and the prohibition to regular and irregular troops (*chāṭas* and *bhaṭas*) from entering the village. The right to fines imposed on thieves,[64] is here instead retained by the donor. The couple *udraṅga* and *uparikara* has already been met. If *uparikara* is interpreted as a tax imposed on temporary tenants, then *udraṅga* must be the tax levied on permanent ones.[65] It is however more likely that in the same way in which I have interpreted *uparikara*, *udraṅga* too might have been an extra cess, whatever its nature, imposed on all kinds of tenants. The second privilege granted (*a-chāṭa-bhaṭa-prāveśya*) indicates the kind of harassment-free land tenure the donees

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[60] J.F. Fleet, "Sanchi Stone Inscription of Chandragupta II. The Year 93," *CII* III (1888), pp. 29-34.
[61] J.F. Fleet, "Indor Copper-plate Inscription of Skandagupta. The Year 146," *CII* III (1888), pp. 68-72.
[62] Notably land grants of 'under-lords' are found only in the later Gupta period after the reign of Skandagupta. Only the Vākāṭaka grants can be considered contemporary with the major Gupta dynasts.
[63] J.F. Fleet, "Khoh Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Hastin. The Year 156," *CII* III (1888), pp. 93-100.
[64] *Ibid.*, p. 96, lines 12-13.
[65] Maity, *Economic Life in Northern India in the Gupta Period*, pp. 84-86.

were going to enjoy in their village. This was of course a perpetual endowment as it is clear from the threats made to those who in future would interfere with the grant. Of interest however is the exception recorded in the grant. If the Sanskrit reading is correct[66] it would refer to the retention by *mahārāja* Hastin of the privilege of collecting fines from thieves. In the Pāla charters, the corresponding passage, *caurodharaṇa*, was instead one of the privileges granted to the donees. The same *mahārāja* Hastin, however, issued another charter 7 years later,[67] in which reference to this exception was dropped all together. To be noticed in both these copper-plates is the eulogistic stanza which refers to *mahārāja* Hastin as "the giver of thousands of cows, and elephants, and horses, and gold, and many lands."[68] Land has become a valuable asset and a source of fame when donated, something which in the eulogistic portions of Gupta inscriptions was missing.

In the charters of the *mahārājas* of Ucchakalpa the conditions under which land is given away are similar to those in the charters of the Parivrājaka kings. In the Karitalai copper-plate (492-493 AD),[69] king Jayanātha grants the village of Chandāpallikā to the *brāhmaṇa* Mitrasvāmin. Among the general privileges granted we encounter again the concession of *udraṅga* and *uparikara*, the prohibition to regular and irregular troops (*chāṭas* and *bhaṭas*) from entering the new holding and the retention by the king of the right to fines imposed on thieves. However what is more interesting in this grant is the address to the cultivators (*kuṭumbikas*), *brāhmaṇas* and artisans. They are exhorted to pay the donee the customary *bhāgabhoga-kara*,[70] being obedient to his (i.e. the donee's) commands. This expression, as it will be remembered, refers to a share in grain and to occasional and extraordinary tributes the king was entitled to, a privilege standard in all the Pāla grants. As in other grants this one was also given in perpetuity, as can be seen from the praise of and the threats to those who in future will respectively safeguard or interfere with the grant. Besides, it is clearly stated that the holding will be enjoyed by the donee's sons and sons' sons.

The same king Jayanātha three years later in another grant enlarged the space

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[66] *chora-varjjam*: Fleet, "Khoh Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Hastin. The Year 156," *CII* III (1888), p. 96, line 13.
[67] J.F. Fleet, "Khoh Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Hastin. The Year 163," *CII* III (1888), pp. 100-5.
[68] Fleet, "Khoh Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Hastin. The Year 156," *CII* III (1888), p. 96, line 5; "Khoh Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Hastin. The Year 163," p. 103, lines 4-5.
[69] J.F. Fleet, "Karitalai Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Jayanatha. The Year 174," *CII* III (1888), pp. 117-20.
[70] *Ibid.*, p. 118, line 9.

of the donee's mastery to include "the tribute of the customary duties, royalties, taxes, gold, &c." (*samuchita-śulka-bhāgabhoga-kara-hiraṇy-ādi pratyāy-opanayaṃ*).[71] The formula as it stands is significant for the inclusion of *śulka*, which were customs and tolls from commercial transactions and the movement of goods. Three more charters of this dynasty may be mentioned. The son of king Jayanātha, the *mahārāja* Sarvanātha in his Khoh plate of the year 193 (511-512 AD), while repeating in the main the charter of his father adds *hiraṇya*[72] to *bhāgabhoga-kara,* thus completing the standardisation of a formula which would be repeated in a great number of early medieval Indian charters. In a second charter, the same king Sarvanātha, while repeating the expressions and content of his previous charter, introduces some interesting additions. Half of the village Dhavashaṇḍikā is to be enjoyed by the grantee, the *brāhmaṇa* Choḍugomika, "with remission of all taxes" (*sarvva-kara-tyagaḥ*) and "with such tribute as may accrue" (*dr(s)-otpadya-mānaka-pui(pra)tyāya-sametaḥ*).[73] These new additions allow us to infer that in these charters what is indeed mentioned either as immunity or privilege has but an illustrative character. The real purport of the charter is to confer on the donee true and full mastery on the land granted; in this case, for instance, the donee will be able to advance claim on future sources of income too. The last charter of this dynasty which we shall consider, Sarvanātha in the year 214 (532-533 AD) by means of a copper-plate sanctions the transfer of two villages in the enjoyment of a certain Pulindabhaṭa to a new donee, the *brāhmaṇa* Kumarāsvāmin. Notably, the two villages are explicitly endowed according to the rule of *bhūmicchidra*.[74]

The charters of the Vākāṭaka kings are particularly important both for their political connection and contemporaneity with the Guptas. Strictly speaking, all the three charters we shall consider here are older than any of those previously analysed. The first one, issued towards the end of the first decade of the 5th century by queen Prabhāvatīguptā, the daughter of Chandragupta II, grants the *brāhmaṇa* Chanālasvāmin the village of Daṅguṇa.[75] Addressing the village householders (*kuṭumbinas*), *brāhmaṇas* and others she sets out the conditions of the grant. The village is thus given with the

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[71] J.F. Fleet, "Khoh Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Jayanatha. The Year 177," *CII* III (1888), p. 122, line 11; for the translation quoted see p. 124, line 11 of the same article.
[72] J.F. Fleet, "Khoh Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Sarvanatha. The Year 193," *CII* III (1888), p. 127, line 17.
[73] J.F. Fleet, "Khoh Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Sarvanatha," *CII* III (1888), p. 131, lines 9-10.
[74] J.F. Fleet, "Khoh Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Sarvanatha. The Year 214, *CII* III (1888), p. 137, line 13.
[75] See K.B. Pathak, "Poona Plates of the Vakataka Queen Prabhavati-Gupta. The 13th Year," *EI* XV (1925), pp. 39-44.

prohibition to *chāṭas* and *bhaṭas* to enter it; with hidden treasures and deposits; and with *kḷpta* and *upakḷpta*. Beside these privileges a series of rights are retained by the queen and not conceded to the donee. These are the rights to pasturage, hides and charcoal; to the purchase of fermenting drugs; to mines; to the succession of cows and bulls; and finally, to flowers and milk.[76] This formulation is quite standard and is also found in the two copper-plates of Prabhāvatīguptā's son Pravarasena II, dated in his 18th regnal year, in the end of the second quarter of the 5th century.[77] The two charters, however, add some interesting clauses. Among the people addressed by both the grants, *brāhmanas* and *kuṭumbinas* are here replaced by the king's "obedient and high-born officers, employed in the office of general superintendents (*sarvvāddhykṣa*), and *chāṭas* and *bhaṭas*."[78] Among the privileges to be enjoyed by the donee, then, the one grant adds "with immunity from all tributes" (*a-kara-dāyī*),[79] while both grants mention forced labour (*viṣṭi*) as one of the exemptions of the new holding.[80]

These three grants are interesting for several different reasons, but for our purpose it suffices to notice the number and kind of rights which were retained by the donors. These give us an idea of the kind of 'fiscal' control the Vākāṭaka kings had on their territory. Taking for granted the income from arable land, it seems that these rulers had and retained rights on mines, salt, charcoal and anything else of value extracted from the ground. Mention of cows and bulls, though difficult to interpret, also seems to refer to the right of kings or royal parties to retain the use of cattle either for milk or for agricultural labour.[81] The right to flowers and milk would very likely correspond to the *bhoga* of other charters, a kind of occasional tribute to be offered by villagers to passing or visiting royal envoys. *Kḷpta* and *upakḷpta* are instead unique terms not to be found in other dynasties' inscriptions. Their meaning is not at all clear. Sircar renders them as fixed and unfixed taxes;[82] S.K. Maity, instead, interprets them not as taxes, but as some royal right over land, the nature of which remains unknown.[83]

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[76] All these immunities and exceptions are found in *ibid.*, p. 42, lines 16-18.
[77] See J.F. Fleet, "Chammak Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Pravarasena II," *CII* III (1888), pp. 235-43; "Siwani Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Pravarasena II," pp. 243-49.
[78] Fleet, "Chammak Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Pravarasena II," *CII* III (1888), p. 241. The same reference is found in the "Siwani Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Pravarasena II," p. 248.
[79] Fleet, "Chammak Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Pravarasena II," *CII* III (1888), p. 238, line 26.
[80] *sarvva-viṣṭi-parihāra-parīhṛtaḥ*: *ibid.*, p. 238, lines 28-29; see also Fleet's "Siwani Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Pravarasena II," p. 246, lines 29-30.
[81] Maity, *Economic Life in Northern India in the Gupta Period*, p. 87.
[82] Sircar, *Landlordism and Tenancy...*, p. 62.
[83] Maity, *Economic Life in Northern India in the Gupta Period*, p. 92.

3.3 Gupta land charters from North-eastern India

North-eastern India of the middle and late Gupta period has yielded a number of copper-plates which are quite unique in the overall scenario of Indian epigraphy. They are to be found only in the fifth-sixth centuries and only in the restricted areas of Northern Bihar and Bengal. Their specificity lies in two facts. First, these charters do not deal with outright gifts of land but are the records of land sales which in all cases are carried out either in view of a religious donation or in view of the ritual and religious needs of the purchaser himself. Second, the procedure followed in the sales is very much similar in all the charters and refers to *adhikaraṇas* as the local governing bodies handling the transactions. Here, however, I will look only at the economic dimensions of these transactions, leaving other aspects for later treatment.

In these charters, the land being sold is characterised either as *khila*, or *vāstu* or *kṣetra*, or indeed as a combination of all three. For example, the *brāhmaṇa* Karppaṭika in the year 124 (443-444 AD) applied for one *kulyavāpa*[84] of *aprada-aprahata-khila-kṣetra*,[85] somewhere in Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*. In another case, the *nagara-śreṣṭhin* Ribhupāla wanted to complete his previous donation of 11 *kulyavāpas* of *aprada* land with additional *vāstu* land for the building of two temples and annexed premises.[86] Again in the year 169 (488-489 AD) the district head (*viṣayapati*) Chhattramaha in exchange for 8 *dīnāras* purchased 4 *kulyavāpas* of non-revenue yielding (*samudaya-vāhya ... akiñchit-pratikara*)[87] land (*khila-kṣetra*). The land will then be donated to a *brāhmaṇa* as a perpetual endowment (*akṣaya-nīvī*).[88] Instructions are subsequently

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[84] *Kulyavāpa* together with its smaller units, the *droṇavāpa* and *āḍhavāpa* are found in these charters as land measures. According to the Paharpur copper-plate of the Gupta year 159 (K.N. Dikshit, *EI* XX (1929-30), pp. 59-64), 1 *kulyavāpa* is made up of 8 *droṇavāpas*, and 1 *droṇavāpa* equals 4 *āḍhavāpas*. Unfortunately we do not know how much land these different measures referred to. Scholars do not agree with each other's proposed measurement. All we can say is that these measures are based on seed sown. Thus *kulyavāpa*, *droṇavāpa* and *āḍhavāpa* refer to the quantity of land that can be sown with a *kulya*, a *droṇa* and an *āḍhaka* respectively. On this understanding, Sircar proposes two solutions: if the original calculation was based on paddy seeds, then 1 *kulyavāpa* would equal between 38 and 48 modern Bengali *bighas*, 1 *droṇavāpa* would equal between 4 ½ and 6 *bighas* and 1 *āḍhavāpa* would equal 1 1/8 and 1 ½ *bighas*. If instead the system was based on paddy seedlings then 1 *kulyavāpa* would equal between 128 and 160 modern Bengali *bighas*, 1 *droṇavāpa* would equal between 16 and 20 *bighas* and 1 *āḍhavāpa* would equal 4 and 5 *bighas*. See Sircar, *Studies in the Political and Administrative Systems...*, pp. 143-47. For other proposals see Islam, *Aspects of Economic History of Bengal...*, pp. 73-78. For a somewhat conservative estimate see B.M. Morrison, *Political Centres and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal* (Tucson, 1970), pp. 85-89. According to him 1 *kulyavāpa* is certainly bigger than a *bigha*, perhaps approximating an acre (1 acre = 3 *bighas*).

[85] Radhagovinda Basak, "The Five Copper-plate Inscriptions of the Gupta Period," *EI* XV (1919-20), plate no. 1, p. 130, lines 7-8.

[86] *Ibid.*, plate no. 4, p. 139, line 8.

[87] N.G. Majumdar, "Nandapur Copper-plate of the Gupta Year 169," *EI* XXIII (1935-36), p. 54, lines 8-9.

[88] *Ibid.*, p. 54, line 7; the same meaning is rendered with *akṣaya-nīvī-dharma* on p. 55, line 15.

given in order that the plot of land sold may not hamper the farming activities (*karṣaṇa*) of neighbouring householders (*kuṭumvinas*).[89] It is then remarked that the gift will result in the emperor (Budhagupta) gaining one sixth of the religious merit (*dharmma-ṣaḍ-bhāga*).[90]

Usually the terms *khila*, *vāstu* and *kṣetra* are interpreted as waste land, habitable land and cultivated land respectively. *Khila* in our charters is often qualified by one or both the terms *aprada* and *aprahata*, meaning not yet alienated and untilled, respectively.[91] It seems thus that the land which was sold was generally speaking waste or at least fallow land,[92] and did not yield revenue. Although *kṣetra* is sometimes used alone,[93] it is more likely that the term referred not only to cultivated fields but might also have referred to land in general. This seems to be borne out by the Paharpur plate.[94] The *brāhmaṇa* Nathāśarmmā and his wife Rāmī apply for 1 ½ *kulyavāpas* of non-revenue yielding (*samudaya-vāyi-ā-pratikara*) *khila-kṣetra-vāstu* to be given perpetually to a Jaina institution according to *akṣaya-nīvī*.[95] When the request is accepted, the amount of land specified, lying in four villages, is demarcated. Interestingly, the specification of the four plots does not mention *khila*. Three plots in three different villages are simply qualified as *kṣetra* measuring respectively 4, 4 and 1 ½ *droṇavāpas*; the fourth plot instead is specified as 1 ½ *droṇavāpas* of *vāstu* (homestead).[96] However these *kṣetras* undoubtedly were waste or fallow land and so were qualified at the couple's request as being non-revenue yielding plots. Though not clearly mentioned in the charters it may be taken for granted that such sales-cum-donations were given free from present and future revenue demands as can be inferred from the perpetuity of the grants and their non transferability.[97]

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[89] *Ibid.*, p. 55, line 13.
[90] *Ibid.*, p. 54, line 11.
[91] For a comprehensive discussion of this terminology see Maity, *Economic Life in Northern India in the Gupta Period*, pp. 33-36.
[92] Yamazaki Toshio, "Some Aspects of Land-sale Inscriptions in Fifth and Sixth Century Bengal," *Acta Asiatica* 43 (Aug. 1982), p. 20.
[93] See for instance the two Faridpur charters of Dharmāditya (540-560 AD) in F.E. Pargiter, "Three Copper-plate Grants from East Bengal," *IA* XXXIX (July 1910), pp. 193-202.
[94] Dikshit, "Paharpur Copper-plate Grant of the Gupta Year 159," *EI* XX, pp. 59-64.
[95] *Ibid.*, p. 62, lines 4-5.
[96] *Ibid.*, p. 62, lines 7-9.
[97] In all of these charters reference is made to the damnation of those who in future would dare tamper with the grants; *akṣaya-nīvī* as the kind of tenure enjoyed by the donees is found in most of these charters; the same is to be said of the reference to the duration of the moon and the sun as the time span of the land tenure conceded.

4. Early medieval North Indian agrarian system

It is clear that the kind of land systems and agrarian structures deduced from the charters of Pāla and Gupta times must have been very similar in both social formations, the differences being in degree rather than in kind. As far as granted land was concerned, the totality of the grants transferred land under perpetual tenure either as an outright gift or as the result of a purchase. The common expression by means of which perpetuity was granted referred to the duration of the moon and the sun. Imprecatory verses directed towards possible present and future interference with the donated land could not but reinforce the same idea of perpetual endowments.

Perpetuity, however, seems to have been conditioned by the idea of non-transferability. Before the 8th century, *akṣaya nīvī* or other similar expressions compounded with the word *nīvī* referred to the perpetual use of land resources accruing from an unalienable capital. Apparently, from the 8th century, the expression was replaced with *bhūmicchidra* which seems to have conveyed the same meaning. The distinction between pre and post 8th century grants is, however, only explicative of a terminological tendency. In fact the rule of *bhūmicchidra* was found in the charter of Sarvanātha dated 532-533 AD, long before the 8th century. It remains unknown whether or not a change in terminology reflected a change in the actual practice of donation.

The concession of a series of immunities accompanying the grants of land was another constant characteristic of the many charters of the early medieval period. As we have seen these varied, however, according to time and space. In broader perspective, these immunities tended to become more and more comprehensive and all inclusive. The Pāla charters, for instance, seem to have endowed their respective donees with more sweeping powers, than earlier grants. The Vākāṭaka grants, by contrast, withheld rights of pasturage, charcoal, mines and so on. Similarly in some of the charters of the kings of Ucchakalpa and of the Parivrājaka dynasty, the right to fines collected from thieves was retained by the monarch. Whatever the case, both early and late grants speak clearly of the kind of economic hold the king or grantor had on the territory under his lordship. Arable land was possibly the main asset controlled by the king or his appointee, but mines, deposits, trees, pasture lands, and possibly irrigation works were also under his control. Supposedly some of these items were also the object of specific royal 'monopoly'. In a situation in which the king was the ultimate owner of

all the land in his domains, as we will see below, to speak of particular monopolies (waste lands, minerals, water sources etc.) might sound contradictory. In reality the regime of multiple proprietorship allows us to speak of monopolies as particular items over which a king's right and claim were more evident. Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra* lists a series of such monopolies including waste land and salt.[98] That such monopolies might have existed in ancient Indian polities may be inferred from the following verse of *Manu*: "The king should take away the entire stock of a man who, out of greed, exports goods that are pre-empted by the king's (monopoly) or forbidden (to be exported)."[99]

A special note must be made on the importance of water works in farming. Though evidence is not conclusive, it seems that the task of building tanks, wells and canals often rested with kings, landlords and substantial landowners in general, who in so doing were able to strengthen their economic hold on the land. In the Junagadh rock inscription, Cakrapālita, the son of Purnadatta the ruler of the Surāṣṭras, is credited with the repair of the Sudarśana lake in the year 137 (456-457 AD). The lake had its embankments broken due to excessive rains.[100] Significantly, on the same Junagadh rock, the inscription of the *mahākṣatrapa* Rudradāman informs us that the Sudarśana lake, built by Chandragupta Maurya and embellished by Aśoka, had already being repaired in 150 AD by the *mahākṣatrapa* himself.[101] Cakrapālita, then, was simply prolonging a long standing tradition. Furthermore, B.D. Chattopadhyaya has skilfully noticed that "rural settlements, in the way they figure in the inscriptions, had close access to surface water in the forms of rivers, riverlets (*sic*), channels and ponds."[102] This closeness cannot but have been a function of agricultural activities. The construction of tanks was indeed one of the major tasks in which the kings of our period engaged. The court-poet Sandhyākaranandin, for instance, extolled Rāmapāla for having "constructed great works of public utility in the shape of large lakes with tall palm trees and lines of hillocks on their border..."[103] Despite Sandhyākaranandin's contention, however, I doubt that these water works were of the kind of 'public' works we are accustomed to today. Instead they were possibly 'private' works from which

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[98] Islam, *Aspects of Economic History of Bengal...*, pp. 107; 122.
[99] *Manu*, VIII.399.
[100] J.F. Fleet, "Junagadh Rock Inscription of Skandagupta. The Years 136, 137 and 138," *CII* III (1888), p. 64 lines 17-22.
[101] F. Kielhorn, "Junagadh Inscription of Rudradaman; the Year 72," *EI* VIII (1905-6), pp. 36-49.
[102] Chattopadhyaya, *Aspects of Rural Settlements...*, p. 29, *passim*.
[103] Haraprasad Sastri ed., *Rāmacaritam of Sandhyākaranandin* (Calcutta, 1969), III.42B.

kings and landlords augmented their income and extended their control over economic activities.

In this respect the Pāla records are interesting for the number of details not found in earlier charters. As I mentioned earlier, grass land, pasture land, water, low and high land, ditches, trees and shrubs, fish and market dues etc. were all transferred to the donee. If they could be transferred, it means that they were usually enjoyed by the king. The relative lack of these elements in previous grants may indicate a lesser economic hold on land in earlier polities as compared to that of the Pālas. It has been already remarked above that perhaps in the time span separating the Gupta social formation and the Pāla one, the notion of wealth underwent changes in meaning because of changes in the economic fabric of the then social formation.

The availability of coinage, a common feature throughout the entire Gupta period, seems to have somehow decreased after the 6th century. The almost complete absence of coins[104] throughout the Pāla period as compared to previous periods on the one hand and to contemporary environments in other northern Indian polities on the other,[105] would in fact point to a steep decline, if not total collapse, in trading activities in North-eastern India.[106] Although some of the inscriptions already discussed[107] do refer to monetary transactions, it is doubtful whether they entailed metal coinage. The sums were probably counted in cowrie-shells. This was the currency which was in circulation even in the successive Sena kingdom up to the Muslim conquest. The early 12th century *Rāmacarita* for instance bears witness to the fact that Madanapāla's army was "maintained by cowries (as wages) and daily bread."[108] The claim is also supported by archaeological excavations. While no coinage has been discovered so far that might be linked to the Pāla dynasty, a jar full of cowries has been unearthed from the ruins of Paharpur, the ancient Buddhist monastery founded by Dharmapāla in North Bengal.[109] A diminished availability of pecuniary wealth might thus have resulted in an increase in the economic value attached to land. If we then consider the four villages directly

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[104] Only two copper coins have been discovered in the excavations at Paharpur; these have been dubiously attributed to Vigrahapāla I; see K.N. Dikshit, *Excavations at Paharpur, Bengal. Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India* 55 (Delhi, 1938), p. 19. J. Deyell would deny such an attribution, ascribing the coins, instead, to the Gurjara-Pratīhāras; see J. Deyell, *Living Without Silver* (Delhi, 1990), p. 27.
[105] Deyell, *Living Without Silver,* p. 36.
[106] See M. Tarafdar, "Trade and Society in Medieval Bengal," *The Indian Historical Review* 4.2 (January 1978), pp. 274-86.
[107] See D.C. Sircar, "Bangaon Plate of Vigrahapala III; Regnal Year 17," *EI* XXIX (1951-52) and D.C. Sircar, "Bhaturiya Inscription of Rajyapala," *EI* XXXIII (1959-60), pp. 150-54.
[108] *Rāmacarita*, IV.36B.
[109] Dikshit, *Excavations at Paharpur, Bengal*, p. 33.

granted by Gupta emperors and the absence in their respective records of many of the immunities and privileges to be found in the Pāla grants, our hypothesis may find some kind of support. Unfortunately our knowledge of the practice of the Gupta emperors is very fragmentary and incomplete. It may well be that the formula "all the customary tributes of the village, consisting of that which is to be measured; gold (*hiraṇya*) etc."[110] found in the two Gupta copper-plates, may summarise and thus imply what in the Pāla grants instead has been clearly spelled out.[111] We should not forget that the conditions and privileges listed in these grants may very likely have had an illustrative function only and that even the grants more devoid of specific privileges and immunities may have in reality implied equally comprehensive endowments. It remains however, that at least the formal appearance of the plates shows with the passing of time an increasing extension of the kind of lordship granted.

Regional variations should also be taken into consideration. While Gupta grants are poor in information, the contemporary Vākāṭaka ones are more specific and clearly outline the number and nature of conditions and privileges accompanying the grants. At the same time, the Gupta period sale deeds from North-eastern India, though repeating in the main the structure of other grants, seem to refer to an economic and political context quite characteristic of this area alone. They are the only charters transferring plots of waste land, while the great majority of contemporary and later grants transferred mainly villages or plots of cultivated land. Besides, these North-eastern Gupta records inform us of land sales and donations carried out not by kings or subordinate officers, as it is the case in the majority of other grants, but by individual people ranging from *brāhmanas*, *kuṭumbins*,[112] *nagara-śreṣṭhins*, *kulaputras* (i.e. nobleman)[113] to officers.

Whatever the differences among charters of different areas and different times I cannot but stress once again the fact that we are basically dealing with a kind of agrarian structure which was quite homogeneous throughout the whole of the early

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[110] Bhandarkar, "Gayā Copper-plate Inscription of Samudragupta: The Year 9," *CII* III (1981), p. 230, lines 11-12.

[111] It may be recalled that the records of the Gurjara-Pratīhāra kings, contemporary with the Pālas, like the two copperplates of Samudragupta do not specify any single source of income transferred, but merely refer to the whole of it with the expression *sarvāyasameta* (F. Kielhorn, "Daulatpura Plate of Bhojadeva I of Mahodaya," *EI* V (1898-99), line 8, p. 211); see D.N. Jha, "Presidential Address," *Indian History Congress* (Proceedings of the 40th session, Waltair, 1979), p. 26. However there is little doubt that the Pratīhāra charters gifted donees with comprehensive endowments. See also Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, p. 80.

[112] R.G. Basak, "Baigram Copper-plate Inscription of the Gupta Year 128," *EI* XXI (1931-32), pp. 78-83.

[113] Basak, "The Five Damodarpur Copper-plate Inscriptions of the Gupta Period," *EI* XV, plate no. 5, pp. 141-45.

medieval Indian period. The agrarian template of this age, as it emerges from the inscriptions, understands the king as the lord of the earth. This meant that he was the lawful owner of all the land and capable of giving away villages, waste and arable land, trees and water resources, market dues and customs and so on. The differences encountered among and within charters may have simply referred to differences in claim but not in right. This comprehensive form of ownership was enjoyed by kings equally in the Gupta and Pāla periods and was the basis for their revenue demands. What changed was only the claim over those resources which fluctuated to reflect their newly discovered economic value. This seems to be the case of the Pāla charters. Here mention is consistently made of Mango and Mahua trees as resources transferred to the donees, privileges which had not been mentioned in Gupta times. Similarly, Arecanut and Coconut trees not to be found in the Pāla charters are constantly mentioned in the grants of the Senas, who displaced the Pālas in Bengal, in the 12th century. The fact that these two latter types of trees are not mentioned in Pāla inscriptions may be explained either by their absence in North Bengal[114] or, less likely, by their economic value being unknown in Pāla times.

That the king was indeed the ultimate source of ownership of whatever was on his territory, is underscored by the fact that in all the charters we have considered, his authority is invoked no matter what kind of land transaction is recorded. This points to the fact that the particular kind of ownership enjoyed by the king was continuous with lordship, the ultimate power of protection. Ownership, as it will be shown below, did not necessarily entail lordship, but lordship was instead established on ownership and entailed the ability to wield *daṇḍa*, the rod of power, the symbol *par excellence* of the king's protective functions. In any kingdom only the king was fully entitled to dispose of coercive force, although other lords could share this privilege if they submitted to the overlordship of the king, that is, only if they exercised *daṇḍa* in conjunction with and submission to the king. Often, thus, the king is portrayed as the donor of land. This was the case with most of the Pāla grants and the grants of the kings of Ucchakalpa. In many other cases the king's officers are seen as the donors, but even here the names of their respective overlords are always mentioned. The Bangaon plate[115] of Vigrahapāla III records the donation of Ghaṇṭīśa, the servant (*vidheya*) of the king. The same is true

[114] It is conceivable that such commercially valuable trees were introduced in North Bengal from South-east Bengal in the 11th-12th century; see Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, p. 251.
[115] Sircar, "Bangaon Plate of Vigrahapala III; Regnal Year 17," *EI* XXIX, pp. 48-57.

for the Bhaturiya inscription of Rājyapāla.[116] In the latter Yaśodāsa, an officer (*tantrādhikārin*) of Rājyapāla, is the real donor. In Gupta times, the Sanchi stone inscription informs that Amrakārdava, an officer of Chandragupta II, carried out the land donation. The charters of the contemporary Parivrājaka kings are commenced with the mention of their Gupta overlords. Even in the particular grants from North-eastern India, the Gupta emperor, although not immediately present at the transactions, is often invoked as the source of authority through which the transaction is legitimised.[117] When instead known officers of particular kings or subject rulers issued charters on their own authority, it is very likely that the donor concerned was in the process of becoming himself a king, and assuming the kind of legitimacy invested in kingship.

In late Gupta times for instance, the kings of Ucchakalpa were certainly subjected to Gupta overlordship, but in their charters no mention is made of any of the Gupta emperors. The example of Bhīmadeva in late Pāla times is a case in point. He was the officer in charge of peace and war (*sāndhivigrahika*) of king Madanapāla and the land charter executive (*dūtaka*) in the latter's Manahali grant (c. 1152 AD).[118] In the Rajghat inscription,[119] Bhīmadeva is said to have built a temple in the region of Vārāṇasī. In the inscription he does not refer to the reigning Pāla king and speaks instead of the Gauda kings in the past tense. This might indicate the beginning of a process which might have constituted him as an independent lord. A clearer case is represented by Vaidyadeva, the *saciva* of king Kumarāpāla. He had been sent by the latter to quell the insubordination of Timgyadeva, the king of Kāmarūpa, and was himself subsequently appointed ruler in his place. The fact is that in his copperplate grant, Vaidyadeva styles himself as *paramamāheśvara, paramavaiṣṇava, paramabhaṭṭāraka* and *mahārājādhirāja*.[120] It is thus believed that Vaidyadeva could grant land without the Pāla king's approval either because after the death of Kumārapāla Vaidyadeva broke free from Pāla overlordship or simply because Pāla rule had by then come to an end. Only then in fact could he have employed such imperial

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[116] Sircar, "Bhaturiya Inscription of Rajyapala," *EI* XXXIII, pp. 150-54.

[117] In these inscriptions the emperor is often just mentioned at the beginning of the inscriptions or is referred to as the earner of one sixth of the religious merit occurring from the transaction. For the first case see all of the 5 Damodarpur plates: Basak, "The Five Damodarpur Copper-plate Inscriptions of the Gupta Period," *EI* XV, pp. 113-45; for the second case see Majumdar, "Nandapur Copper-plate of the Gupta Year 169," *EI*, XXIII, pp. 52-57.

[118] Vasu, "The Manahali Copper-plate Inscription of Madanapāladeva," *JASB* 69.1, pp. 66-73.

[119] D.C. Sircar, "Rajghat Inscription of Bhimadeva," *EI* XXXII (1957-58), pp. 277-82; see also D.C. Sircar, "Note on Rajghat Inscription of Bhimadeva," *EI* XXXVII (1967-68), pp. 245-46.

[120] Arthur Venis, "Copper-plate Grant of Vaidyadeva, King of Kāmarūpa," *EI* II (1894), lines 47-48, p. 353.

titles.[121] Whatever the case, it is significant that such instances are recorded right at the end of both the Gupta and Pāla rules respectively, that is, at times of political weakness and of dynastic change.

If the king was truly the owner of all the land as I contend, two consequences are inescapable. First, what we have been variously calling taxes, revenues, income and tributes above must properly be defined as rent, which the peasants had to pay for the use of resources which in the last instance belonged to the king.[122] Though a comprehensive picture of the system of rent in the different periods and places of early medieval North India remains beyond our grasp, sources indicate that such a system was both pervasive and comprehensive.

Summarily, the payment of rent assumed different forms. It seems that payment in kind was by far the most common form of exaction. The formula *Bhāga-bhoga-kara* appears from the Gupta period onwards as the most customary form of rent, involving the king's grain share, and the ordinary and extraordinary requests whose nature is often unclear to us. But rent was also paid in cash, if the term *hiraṇya* is accepted with the meaning I proposed above. Custom dues, *śulka*, might possibly have been paid in cash too. The currency in vogue changed over time so that the metallic coinage of the Gupta period may have given way from the 8th century to cowrie-shells as the most common medium for economic transactions and exchange. But rent was possibly paid in labour too. From Vākāṭaka inscriptions we know that the exemption from *viṣṭi* was one of the privileges conceded to the recipients of grants. In Pāla charters, by contrast, *viṣṭi* does not appear, though *parihṛita-sarva-pīḍa* (i.e. free from all obstructions and molestation) may include it. Admittedly, we know very little of the actual content of this latter expression. It is, however, probable that rent paid in labour did not necessarily entail the determination of the peasantry either as slave or serf.[123] The legal framework of slavery and serfdom was unnecessary since peasants' subjection was already an economic reality and necessity.

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[121] See R.C. Majumdar, *History of Ancient Bengal* (Calcutta, 1971), p. 156.

[122] That the true nature of so called taxes was rent may be perceived by what Sircar calls *Kara-śāsana*: "a charter recording a revenue-paying grant or the land granted by such a charter," (*Studies in the Political and Administrative Systems...*, p. 68). In these charters either the donee or somebody else must pay a fixed annual rent for the grant to be enjoyed. We have already met the Bhaturiya inscription of Rājyapāla, where Yaśodāsa, the *tantrādhikārin* of the king, had to pay an annual fee of 100 *purāṇas* to have the grant to god Vṛṣabhadhvaja validated. See Sircar, "Bhaturiya Inscription of Rajyapala," *EI* XXXIII, p. 154, line 16.

[123] See B.N.S. Yadav, "Immobility and Subjection of Indian Peasantry in Early Medieval Complex," *The Indian Historical Review* 1.1 (1974), pp. 18-26.

The second consequence which is logically deduced from the statement of the king's ownership of all the land under his lordship is that whoever holds land in that territory is by necessity a tenant. Unfortunately the nature of inscriptions gives us information which mainly refers to the upper classes of society. We hardly know anything of the tenancy rights of the actual tillers of the soil. That anybody holding land was theoretically a tenant is true, but that all the tenants had the same status is obviously not. In the early medieval period we actually witness a deepening of social stratification. Schematically, we may envisage the formation of a class of land holders with some kind of ownership rights and a class of peasants without those rights. In actual fact however things were more complicated. Among landholders we can distinguish those with simple ownership rights and those with lordship rights over their land.[124] In the same way among the peasants we can distinguish those who had some kind of link to the land they cultivated from those who worked on it as simple labourers.[125] In the charters seen so far we have dealt mainly with records which not only conferred ownership rights on particular people or institutions, but also and above all apportioned lordship over the donated estates. Obviously, this lordship was always subjected to and conditional on the protection of the king. In our inscriptions, in fact, it does not appear that the religious recipients of land grants independently commanded the use of force. This may have happened but, as already anticipated, it is more probable that the king's coercive apparatus instead provided for the judicial and other functions enjoined on the donees. In either case, the donees were always subjected to the king. This lordship was, nevertheless, the most complete form of ownership, the closest to the kind of lordship and hence ownership embodied in the king. The sign of its been granted was the donee's entitlement to the king's rent, the other distinguishing characteristic of lordship *vis à vis* simple ownership. The *Brāhmaṇas* and the religious institutions as recipients of land grants constituted, thus, the highest echelon of the then society. In as much as they had lordship over their own estates they belonged and were part of the ruling class. But their lordship was also conditional for another reason. From our charters we have noticed that, particularly in early grants, some rights were withheld by the donors. This was the case with the Vākāṭaka and the Parivrājaka rulers.

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[124] This distinction is deduced from epigraphic evidence. See for instance the distinction below between the donee of the Maliya plate of Dharasena II and the *kuṭumbin* and *mahattara* whom the land transferred belonged to.

[125] In this respect Sircar's rendering of the terms *uparikara* and *udraṅga* with tax on temporary and permanent tenants respectively may give evidence to the stratification among tenants in our period. Unfortunately this is only an hypothetical translation. See section 2.2 above.

We might thus envisage a sort of hierarchy even within such a class of landlords: those with fuller rights over their land and those with conditional ones.

However, *brāhmaṇas* and religious institutions were not the only components of the growing ruling landed aristocracy. 'Officers' of kings belonged to that class too. For reasons which I will address later in this dissertation, we do not have much epigraphic material recording secular grants to officers. It is however apparent that officers did have lordship over territories.[126] *My contention is that all the names of officers we find in land charters in so called administrative positions were nothing but landlords with a greater or lesser degree of subjection to a particular king.* From epigraphs we know however that officers had personal holdings. In the Bangaon charter of Vigrahapāla III, for instance, Ghaṇṭīśa, the king's *vidheya*, donated land belonging to his *hala* (i.e. *jāgīr*).[127] Although the latter is just an example, it is conceivable that in all the charters in which the king is seen granting land on somebody's request the real donor might have been the petitioner himself who either paid for the grant to be issued or provided the land to be donated or both.[128] This again stresses the fact that even the lordships of 'secular' lords, who enjoyed a higher degree of lordship than the *brāhmaṇas* in that they themselves were entitled to use force, could not grant land without some sort of royal mediation. This landed aristocracy, as I said, constituted the ruling class. Ownership of land coupled with lordship over land positioned these people at the top of the social hierarchy. Within this rank, however, differences existed which further hierarchised the ruling class. As far as *brāhmaṇas* and religious institutions were concerned, concessions of differential privileges and immunities possibly established a hierarchy within the hierarchy. In the case of secular lords, closeness to the king and territorial extension (i.e. the number of villages) of their lordship might have ordered their hierarchical status.

But not all the owners of lands had lordship over their respective estates. It must be clear that all the charters encountered in this paper, and almost the totality of early medieval Indian grants, did not simply transfer ownership of property from one hand to another, but particularly and specifically transferred lordship from a king or a subordinate lord to a donee. This is indicated by the remission of any or most forms of

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[126] Epigraphic but particularly literary evidence referring to officers' land holdings can be found summarised in B.N.S. Yadava, *Society and Culture in Northern India in the 12th Century* (Allahabad, 1973), pp. 142-47.

[127] Sircar, "Bangaon Plate of Vigrahapala III; Regnal Year 17," *EI* XXIX, p. 57, lines 50-51.

[128] This hypothesis, which I consider very likely, is put forward by Sircar. See his *Studies in the Political and Administrative Systems...*, pp. 52-57.

rent. Even in the sale deeds from North-eastern India, what was bought was not land as such but the rent-free status of that same land. Supposedly land could be sold and bought[129] without the consent of the king, as long as the sales did not involve any rent-free privilege.[130] In these cases no lordship was transacted. After all before being granted, land was already in the hands of someone who paid rent. It will be recalled that one of the conditions in the two copper-plates of Samudragupta, was that rent paying cultivators (*kuṭumbins*) from other villages[131] could not be employed. This suggests that the donee could lease out his land to others,[132] if he could, in theory, employ rent paying peasants. This privilege was not conceded in the two charters of Samudragupta; the donee had either to make do with the people already working on the newly donated land or hire people that were not already paying rent to the king. This last deduction is a clue in further understanding the early medieval North Indian agrarian structure. It is possible that not all the people of a given kingdom were paying rent to the king. The *kuṭumbins, kārukas* (i.e. artisans) and others of the two plates of Samudragupta certainly were. But other people, belonging to the lower strata of those societies may have paid some form of rent not to the king but to their respective landlords, be they *kuṭumbins* or others.

The term *kuṭumbin* or *kuṭumbika* is found in most inscriptions from the Gupta period onwards. It is usually accompanied by *mahattara*, which becomes *mahattama* in later grants, apparently without any change in meaning. Without entering the philological discussion surrounding these terms, I simply relay the usually accepted

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[129] To buy land was to acquire some sort of rights (*adhikāras*) over it. However in theory not anyone could be a purchaser: only people with the right kind of entitlements (*adhikāras*) could gain ownership rights. In this respect the *brāhmaṇas* had the highest entitlement of all. The question is taken up in the following chapter.

[130] A clear example of such a practice can be found in the Sāhitya Pariṣad plate of Viśvarūpasena. Here several plots of land are granted to the *brāhmaṇa* Halāyudha. The interesting piece of information is that some of these plots had already been purchased by the same Halāyudha from single individuals. The king Viśvarūpasena will grant to that land, some of which already in the hands of the donee, a rent-free status. Quoted in Sircar, *Studies in the Political and Administrative Systems...*, pp. 199-211.

[131] Bhandarkar, "Gayā Copper-plate Inscription of Samudragupta: The Year 9," *CII* III (1981), p. 230, line 12.

[132] Evidence of this is, as usual, inconclusive. There are however references of such a practice in epigraphs. The Semra plates of the Candella king Paramardin addresses the tenants of the donated villages thus: "...Therefore nobody should cause any hindrance to them (the donees) if they enjoy, cultivate, cause to be cultivated, give away, mortgage or sell these villages, together with their houses and walls,...:" quoted in Sircar, *Landlordism and Tenancy...*, p. 25. (original in *EI* IV, pp. 155-56). Another reference of this kind is found in the Maliya grant of Dharasena II. Here it is said: "...no one should behave so as to cause obstruction to this person in enjoying (it) in accordance with the proper conditions of a grant to a brāhmaṇ (and) cultivating (it), (or) causing (it) to be cultivated or assigning (it to another):" J.F. Fleet, "Maliya Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Dharasena II. The Year 252," *CII* III (1888), p. 171, line 29. Similar instructions can be found in the Sanjan plates of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa king Amoghavarṣa (871 AD); D.R. Bhandarkar, "Sanjan Plates of Amoghavarsha I: Saka-Samvat 793," *EI* XVIII (1925-26), p. 257.

renderings. *Kuṭumbin* is generally translated as agriculturist of certain means. We have already met two *kuṭumbin* brothers buying land for a religious donation in the Baigram plate of Kumarāgupta I. When the term is mentioned with the word *kṣettrakara* (i.e. agricultural workers) as in all Pāla grants, *kuṭumbin* is then rendered as householder, maintaining the connotation of economic well being attached to the term. The same may be said of *mahattaras/mahattamas*, well-off villagers with some kind of leadership functions, usually ranked higher than *kuṭumbins*.[133] We may perhaps define both *kuṭumbins* and *mahattaras/mahattamas* as the landed village class. So at least they seem to appear in the Maliya plate of Dharasena II, the Valabhī king.[134] In this charter, dated to the year 252 of the Gupta Era (571-572 AD), the king grants the *brāhmaṇa* Rudrabhūti land lying in three distinct villages. The first interesting thing to be noticed is that the granted land consisted of 5 plots which were already the property of someone else. Two plots in the village of Antaratrā were the *pratyaya* or *pratyāya*[135] of Vīrasenadantika and Skambasena respectively; in the village of Ḍombhigrāma another plot was the *pratyaya* of Vardhaki; the remaining two plots were situated in Vajragrāma village being respectively the *pratyayas* of *mahattara* Vīkidinna and *kuṭumbin* Boṭaka.[136] We have already met the term *pratyaya* in land charters when referring to remission of revenue, as a form of income. We could maintain the same meaning here, though according to both Fleet and Sircar 'holding' or 'property' is a more appropriate translation.[137] These proprietors, among which were a *mahattara* and a *kuṭumbin*, very likely maintained the possession of their land even after the land was granted but would have to pay rent to the grantee who was now the holder of superior property rights – i.e. lordship rights. What is more, it is likely that these proprietors had their lands cultivated by others, since agriculturists did not enjoy high ranking status in the then social hierarchy and *mahattaras* at least had some kind of leadership functions

[133] For a good treatment of the meaning of these two terms see Toshio, "Some Aspects of Land-sale Inscriptions...," pp. 24-30.
[134] Fleet, "Maliya Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Dharasena II. The Year 252," *CII* III (1888), pp. 164-71.
[135] The two forms of the word appear in the same charter. The first would mean 'subordination', the second 'income.'
[136] *Ibid.*, p. 166, lines 22-26.
[137] Sircar, *Landlordism and Tenancy...*, p. 26.

within the rural communities.[138] These 'others' – the actual tillers of the land – were not paying anything to the king, but instead they had obligations to their respective masters. Only the proprietors possibly had direct dealings with the king first and with the grantee afterwards.

From the inscriptions, we can thus deduce that an heterogeneous class of rent paying landowners developed throughout the early medieval period. These were subjected to either a king or whichever lord stood in his place. Ownership of land was seldom absolute and involved at least the concurrent rights of a *kuṭumbin/mahattara* and a king/donee. Simple ownership rights entailed the payment of rent to the respective lord, whose protective functions justified the revenue claim. However, it is conceivable that both ownership and lordship rights were unevenly distributed so that both landowners and landlords were ranked differentially. Obviously, the nature and quantity of rent due from the landowners depended on their social and political ranking. While *kuṭumbins* had to pay in full their dues, officers and underlords might have instead made a token payment to their respective masters. On the other hand, the actual peasants, were increasingly becoming economically dependent on this latter class of landowners. The kind of tenancy rights they enjoyed is unknown to us. It is probable that they were the most exploited people in the agrarian system.

It is necessary at this point to clarify and characterise the kind of exploitation and subjection these peasants were subjected to. As it has already been remarked, there is no evidence that the peasantry was 'legally' subjected to a class of landholders. The fact however, that the peasantry was not in a condition of serfdom does not imply that peasants were economically free as H. Mukhia contends.[139] The correct deduction would be instead that they were 'legally' free. In practice this legal freedom was meaningless because the subjection we are talking about was very much 'economic', albeit systemic in character. In fact we may imagine an agrarian system of hierarchised ranks in which landlords, landowners and peasants were linked to each other by

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[138] *Ibid.* We may add another consideration to what has already been said above. The dimensions of the five plots of land ranged between 90 and 120 *pādāvartas* each. According to Sircar 100 *pādāvartas* equalled to 10,000 square feet. But if his equation is correct, we would approximately be dealing here with a little more than 50,000 square feet of land, i.e. not even an acre and a half, something very small for a donation, and not sufficient for the subsistence of a single peasant family, let alone the addition of a *brāhmaṇa* donee. If then 100 *pādāvartas* were much more than usually deemed, there exists the possibility that the original proprietors of the 5 plots of land might have hired peasant families to cultivate their respective plots.

[139] H. Mukhia, "Was There Feudalism in Indian History?," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 8.2 (Jan. 1981), pp. 273-310. See also by the same author "Peasant Production and Medieval Indian Society," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 12.2-3 (Jan.-April 1985), pp. 228-51.

politico-economic and religious tiers. However while at the top end of the system political considerations played a major role in defining relations of production, the same was not true at the bottom end of the system. Here the relations of production were more dependent on economic conditions.[140] What we may call the system of multiple ownership of land effectively organised agrarian societies from the king down to the actual peasants in a hierarchy in which ranks were constituted by differential entitlement to ownership rights. In this chain the peasants were at the bottom end of the hierarchy and became effectively and economically subsumed by the multi-layered ruling class. Subsumption meant that the direct producers became less and less free in the process of production. This again meant that the landowner was not external to the process of production, but had a co-ordinating and controlling role in it. Obviously, co-ordination and control did exist at the higher levels of the agrarian structure, but they were stronger at the bottom end of the same structure.

Economic subsumption was the outcome of relations of production in which a system of multiple ownership rights effectively deprived peasants of economic security. *Kuṭumbins* and peasants (*kṣettrakaras*), in fact were not linked by any relation of lordship, and their surrendering of rent to the landowner was determined by mere economic compulsion. Apparently peasants could move from one land to another, but they eventually had to submit to relations of subordination in order simply to survive. The degree of co-ordination and control to which peasants were subjected is only partly captured in our epigraphic sources. Monopoly over certain items, such as trees, pasture lands, water sources etc. certainly gave the landowner control over important means of production, and this conversely implied the increasing subjection of the peasantry. The differential property rights on land must also have established differential forms of tenures. The size and the time span of these reflected and reinforced the actual control of the landlord over the whole economic structure of the estate. Landowners must have laid out specific rules to safeguard their rights on leased estates.

Evidence of co-ordination is difficult to come by in epigraphs. In this respect literary evidence is more telling. Nārada for instance speaks of work instruments and other items given to the cultivators by the landowner.[141] I-tsing, the Chinese pilgrim,

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[140] The conceptualisation of the economic *vis à vis* the political/ideological is discussed further in the following chapter. Here it suffices to say that the political and economic cannot be separated from each other and that both are always manifest in all the different segments of the agrarian hierarchy. However the point made here stresses the quality of the subjection of the peasantry which was predominantly economic and only marginally political in nature.

[141] Quoted in Maity, *Economic Life in Northern India in the Gupta Period*, p. 100.

refers of the Buddhist monasteries' practice of letting out land and supplying peasants with bulls.[142] Of course the more the peasant depended on the landowner for his farming activities, the more the landowner had actual power of co-ordination and hence of control on the process of production. If we finally consider that the actual tiller of the soil was to supply rent to his master, and the latter to his lord and so on, what emerges is a disquieting picture of the kind of subjection the peasant was the object of. The longer the chain the greater the demands on him. The economic subjection of the peasantry may also account for the relative lack of development in the methods and means of agricultural production in our period. Given this state of things, there was hardly any scope on the side of the peasant for any development! But who were these peasants? We do not know who the *kṣettrakaras* of Pāla inscriptions were, but it is certain that they belonged to the lower classes, and perhaps the *medas*, the *andhras*, and the *chāṇḍālas*[143] mentioned in these same inscriptions might have constituted the bulk of the agricultural work force.

Whatever the case the system of agrarian relations created a class of agricultural workers with little or no tenancy rights who actually worked on the land, and provided for the different classes of landowners. These people seemingly possessed only the right to migrate towards possible better conditions, as the two copper plates of Samudragupta let us infer. Freedom of movement was however hampered by the customary and traditional links that tied the peasants to particular lands. Ancestry may have constituted some sort of unwritten right on the side of the peasants but it is likely that these kind of customary rights were easily superseded by superior ownership and lordship rights. Vidyākara in his anthology of court poetry, the *Subhāṣitaratnakoṣa*, collected the following stanza, whic vividly portrays the situation of peasants in our period:

> When villages are left by all but a few families
> wasting under undeserved disaster
> from a cruel district lord (i.e. *bhogapati*)
> but still clinging to ancestral lands,
> villages without grass, where walls are crumbling
> and the mongoose wanders through the lanes;
> they yet show their deepest sadness
> in a garden filled with the cooing of grey doves.[144]

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[142] Quoted in Choudhary, *Early Medieval Village in North-eastern India...*, p. 115.

[143] The terms are found in all the royal charters of the Pālas. See for instance, Sircar, "Bangaon Plate of Vigrahapala III; Regnal Year 17," *EI* XXIX, p. 56, line 31.

[144] Daniel H.H. Ingalls tr., *An Anthology of Sanskrit Court Poetry: Vidyākara's Subhāṣitaratnakoṣa* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1965), p. 333, no. 1175.

CHAPTER THREE

Lordship and Land: the Ideological Configuration of Early Medieval North-eastern Indian Social Formations

1. Introduction

The insights gained in the analysis of the agrarian systems in the previous chapter must now be further conceptualised and contextualised. In pre-modern and non-capitalist social formations the space of the economic does not exist as a separate domain. What does exist is a set of social relations which aim at and are geared toward the production and reproduction of a given society. We may indeed define such social relations as economic relations of production, being clear from the outset that the adjective 'economic' does not and cannot refer exclusively to the material side of such a production. In this chapter stress will be laid on the so called 'ideological' dimensions of the 'economic' relations of production which have been outlined in the previous one. This chapter argues that in both the Pāla and Gupta polities 'religion' occupied the site of the economic and constituted its framework and infrastructure.

However, it must be understood that the configuration of the economic relations of production cannot be the result of an articulation, complex as it may be, of 'instances' or layers of social practice and theory. Religion too as much as economy, cannot be separated and abstracted as an empirical entity in itself.[1] Economy, religion, politics etc. exist only in relation to each other as facets of one and the same historical reality. The chapter will begin where the previous one left off. The economic subjection of the peasantry, the king's ownership of land and the same concept of multiple ownership of land will be taken up again and better clarified. An enquiry into the nature of lordship in the social formations in question will hopefully lead us to the conceptualisation of the early medieval North and North-eastern Indian state as the total system of social relations.

2. The economic and the ideological: a pre-modern conundrum

The analysis of Gupta and Pāla agrarian systems has highlighted the economic subjection of the peasantry. Such a subjection was particularly apparent when seen not in the relationship between landlords of different rank but between the *kuṭumbins* and the *kṣettrakaras* which supposedly occupied the lowest tiers of the agrarian structure

[1] The statement refers specifically to the pre-capitalist context of early medieval India. For wider implications see Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," T. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, 1993), pp. 27-54.

and constituted its basic productive cell. The *kuṭumbins* were the owners of the land with no lordship rights over it, unlike the recipients of land grants to whom the *kuṭumbins* had to pay rent. On the other hand, the *kṣettrakaras* were the actual cultivators, those with no rights on or with the least entitlement to the land they cultivated. The distinction between the landlord/landlord, landlord/*kuṭumbin* and *kuṭumbin/kṣettrakara* relationships is crucial for analytical purposes. In fact what distinguishes the one kind of relationship from the other is not a different relational content but a differential degree of ownership rights which each of the agents is entitled to. Lordship, it will be recalled, was defined as a fuller kind of ownership, in that it alone could dispose of coercive force as well as be the recipient of fuller revenue demands. Eventually, I envisaged a chain of multiple owners starting from the king and ending up with the *kṣettrakaras*.

The focus on the *kuṭumbin/kṣettrakara* agrarian relationship had the specific purpose of highlighting the subjection of the latter, outside of the 'political' framework that lordship necessarily entailed. My intention was to distinguish between a rent paid by a *kuṭumbin* to his overlord and a rent paid by a *kṣettrakara* to his *kuṭumbin* landowner. The latter was specifically economic in nature, and for this reason I summarily defined peasants' subjection as essentially 'economic'. Such a formulation is, however, ambiguous and needs clarification. What is 'specifically economic in nature' in early medieval North-eastern Indian societies? Following Sayer, I contend that nothing is *naturally* endowed with the attribute of the economic,[2] particularly in a pre-capitalist context. Economy does not exist in early medieval India as a separate institution or activity but is embedded, as it were, within the integrated network of social relations.[3] The economic turns out to be the system of social relations which produces and reproduces a society. This comprises necessarily material and ideological elements in a non-separable fashion. It is only and inevitably within the space of a network of particular relationships and activities that the material as an abstract category assumes the social determination and qualification of the economic. No economic domain can ever exist without a social context. To try and distinguish between material/economic

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[2] See Derek Sayer, *The Violence of Abstraction* (Oxford, 1987), p. 27: "Things [...] – contrary to Cohen and much mainstream Marxism – are not, in or of themselves, productive forces. The concept is inherently a relational, and therefore an historical and contextual, one." Sayer's argument applies to any social formation. While acknowledging this, my focus remains on pre-capitalist polities.

[3] The necessity of a unitary approach in the study of early Indian history is highlighted also by N.B. Dirks, "Political Authority and Structural Change in Early South Indian History," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* XIII.2 (April-June 1976), pp. 125-57. This paper, although concerned with a different topic, represents "an attempt to view social and political structures as integrally related:" *ibid.*, p. 126.

and ideological/legal in early medieval Indian societies becomes an exercise in anachronism, for they are not stand-alone institutions or self-supporting entities,[4] but are instead functions of social relations which find their historical consistency only in their mutual relationship. Seen otherwise, they are misleading conceptual abstractions.

The re-qualification of the category of the economic to include 'political' and 'religious' social relations allows for the re-qualification of economic relations of production as the system of social relations which serve as "framework and direct support for the process of appropriation of nature."[5] Theoretically then, economic relations of production do not exclude the ideological as such, but leave out only that ideological which does not constitute a framework for production relations. Going back now to the economic subjection of the peasantry in the Pāla and Gupta social formations it should be clearer that the adjective 'economic' not only qualifies the 'materiality' of the peasants' subjection but also the social relations which rendered that subjection possible. Thus, the distinction made above between rent as an economic category and as a legal one turns out to be both partial and useful at the same time. Partial because there is no difference in kind but only in degree between the agrarian relation of a landlord and his *kuṭumbin* on the one hand and a *kuṭumbin* and his *kṣettrakara* on the other. Useful because analytically such a relation is the basis of the agrarian structure on which other relations are established. What is more, the lack of lordship rights at the disposal of a *kuṭumbin* landowner makes the relationship more readily and crudely observable. Thus, H. Mukhia's free peasantry[6] cannot make sense in either economic or juridical terms. In early medieval India, in fact, the juridical is not a separate institution within the social structure. Economic freedom, then, is not determined by a juridical statement but by the particular configuration of relations of production in a given production process. And the latter, in early medieval North-eastern Indian social formations, nourished by the need to survive, was characterised by the 'economic' subjection of the peasantry.

To further substantiate this claim, which so far I have simply inferred from the kind of burdensome exaction imposed on the peasantry, we need to probe more into

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[4] See Maurice Godelier, *The Mental and the Material* (Thetford, Norfolk, 1984), p. 137: "Professional economists, and with them the general public, spontaneously represent the economic structure of every society in the image of the form that takes in our own - as a body of institutions distinct from other social relations, political, familial, religious, etc." The same idea, though specifically linked to capitalist societies, can be found in Derek Sayer, *The Violence of Abstraction*, p. 70.

[5] Godelier, *The Mental and the Material*, p. 50.

[6] See chapter 2, footnote 139 above.

the concept of ownership itself. According to the re-qualification of the economic proposed above, this probe will not overstep the boundaries of economic relations of production; on the contrary it will provide us with the 'legal' framework without which we would be unable to define what property or production relations were.[7]

2.1 The concept of ownership in early medieval North-eastern India

Traditional Indian historiography is conventionally divided between three ownership theories. Land is considered the property of either the king or the peasant as individuals or of the village community as a whole.[8] Which one of the three theories is taken to be the correct depends on both the kind of evidence one chooses to highlight and to the specific academic[9] or political[10] agenda one is prompted by. In fact Indian literature, from the *Smṛti* texts to the *Purāṇas* and the *Tantras*, is replete with evidence which fits in well with all of these theories. These approaches, however, laudable as they may be, hide, in my view, a deeper problem of both content and method. On the one hand, there has been the attempt to find in Indian history a concept and a practice of property which is the exact reflection of the concept and practice as evolved in western legal tradition;[11] on the other, there has been the tendency to consider the legal domain as

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[7] Sayer, *The Violence of Abstraction*, p. 52. I see it as a useless exercise to try and construe relations of production as ownership relations in some non-juridical sense; *ibid.*, p. 51.

[8] See among many others Lallanji Gopal, "Ownership of Agricultural land in Ancient India," in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient (JESHO)* IV (1961), pp. 240-63; B.P. Sahu, "Introduction," B.P. Sahu. ed., *Land System and Rural Society in Early India* (New Delhi, 1997), pp. 28-33; S.K. Maity, *Economic Life in Northern India in the Gupta Period* (Delhi, 1970), pp. 19-33; D.C. Sircar, *Studies in the Political and Administrative Systems in Ancient and Medieval India* (Delhi, repritn 1995), pp. 1-2; Kamrunnesa Islam, *Aspects of Economic History of Bengal: c. 400-1200 A. D.* (Dhaka, 1984), pp. 101-9.

[9] R.S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism: c. 300-1200* (Calcutta, 1965), chapter 4, speaks of a progressive erosion of communal ownership rights and contemporaneously of an expansion of individual rights which he does not basically distinguish from the rights of the king. His construct evidently suits the feudal framework he is trying to advance.

[10] In colonial times the debate between nationalist and imperialist historians on the existence either of private or royal property of land in ancient India was the academic reflection of the political struggle between British imperialism and Indian national aspirations. A brief account of such a debate and relative bibliography can be found in Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, pp. 135-36.

[11] A dated but clear example of such a practice can be seen in J.N.C. Ganguly, "Hindu Theory of Property," *The Indian Historical Quarterly* 1 (1925), pp. 265-79. The author here construes his argument maintaining throughout the length of the paper a parallelism with western philosophical and juridical traditions.

something autonomous from other kinds of social relations.[12] This double pre-conception is misleading because property does not exist as a 'natural' relationship of owner and thing owned. Being itself an historical product, the concept of property has to be given an empirical content which is necessarily specific to its historical and social conditions.

We have already noted from epigraphic evidence that a variety of people may be appropriately qualified as land owners. In inscriptions, *brāhmaṇas*, king's 'officers', *mahattaras*, *kuṭumbins* and so on, all appear to enjoy some kind of ownership of land. This should not however lead us hastily to conclude that private property was a common institution in early medieval India. This cannot possibly be so, simply because to be meaningful the institution of private property would have required the modern state, its civil society and a positive legislation.[13] On the other hand, the concept of 'private property' appears to be irreconcilable with both the multiple claims of ownership on a single piece of land and its unalienability. In addition, it has already been remarked that in the practice of land grants, it is the king, notwithstanding the existence of different land owners, who appears as the actual giver of land and hence as its proprietor. This was all the more remarkable when the king was seen granting land which was already either the property of one of his officials[14] or of people like *mahattaras* and *kuṭumbins*.[15] In this respect, the same eulogistic portions (*praśasti*) of copper-plates and other inscriptions often mention the reigning king in terms which leave little doubt as to his status *vis à vis* the kingdom he rules. In the first two copper-plates from Damodarpur, the reigning Kumāragupta is designated as 'lord of the world' (*pṛthivīpati*).[16] In the third plate from the same location, Budhagupta is now styled

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[12] Obviously the double kind of misconception does not uniformly apply to every and each scholar. Sharma and other Marxist historians seem to be more aware of the risk of anachronism and eurocentrism in the study of the concept of property in Indian history. It is however regrettable that many Marxist and non Marxist historians alike, for instance, Maity, *Economic Life in Northern India in the Gupta Period*, pp. 19-33, seem to face the question of property from a narrow juridical perspective with no or little reference to the wider economic and political contexts. One of the commendable exceptions is that of B.N.S. Yadava, *Society and Culture in Northern India in the 12th Century* (Allahabad, 1973), pp. 250-56. Unfortunately his effort to contextualise the notion of property falls short of our expectations when he links the growing claim of royal ownership of land to the privatisation of state power in the individual person of the king (*ibid.*, p. 253).

[13] The above consideration does not deny the historical fact that individual people had ownership of land in early medieval India. What it objects to is the use of a modern juridical notion (i.e. 'private property') to qualify ownership relations in those social formations.

[14] See D.C. Sircar, "Bangaon Plate of Vigrahapala III; Regnal Year 17," *Epigraphia Indica* (*EI*) XXIX (1951-52), pp. 48-57.

[15] J.F. Fleet, "Maliya Copper-plate of the Maharaja Dharasena II. The Year 252," *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* (*CII*) III (1888), pp. 164-71.

[16] Radhagovinda Basak, "The Five Copper-plate Inscriptions of the Gupta Period," *EI* XV (1919-20), p. 130, line 2; and p. 133, line 2.

pṛthivīpati, and considering the nature of these inscriptions, it is noticeable that it is again Budhagupta here who is said to give away the land transacted.[17] The idea remains the same when in the Eran stone pillar inscription the same Budhagupta is called 'lord of the earth' (*bhūpati*).[18] That the kingdom was the actual possession of the king is nicely put in the Udayagiri cave inscription of Chandragupta II, which claims that the earth had been "bought by the purchase-money of [the king's] prowess."[19]

Things change little in Pāla inscriptions. In the Khalimpur plate, Dharmapāla is said to be 'a master of kings' (*svāmī bhūmī-patīnām*).[20] In the Malda plate of Mahendrapāla, again, the appellation 'lord of the earth' (*bhūmīśvara*) is given to both the Sugata (the Buddha) and king Gopāla I.[21] The same appellation is also conveyed by the expression *kṣitipati*,[22] applied to Vigrahapāla III. Examples could be multiplied, but the few cases mentioned should be enough to illustrate the fact that a king in early medieval North and North-eastern India conceived himself as king only and in as much as he was the actual proprietor of the land he ruled. The point will be taken up again below. For the time being let us round up the argument with a last epigraphic reference.

In almost all the grants of both the Parivrājaka dynasty and the kings of Ucchakalpa, the section listing blessings and imprecations for those who in future will respectively protect or interfere with the grant of land, quotes from the *Mahābhārata* thus:

> Yudhiṣṭhira, best of kings, carefully preserve land that has previously been given to the twice-born; (*verily*) the preservation (*of a grant*) (*is*) more meritorious than making a grant! The earth has been enjoyed by many kings, commencing with Sāgara; whosoever at any time possesses the earth, to him belongs, at that time, the merit (*of giving this grant now made, if he continues it*)! The giver of land enjoys happiness in heaven for sixty thousand years; (*but*) the confiscator (*of a grant*), and he who assents (*to an act of confiscation*), shall dwell for the same number of years in hell![23]

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[17] *Ibid.*, p. 136, lines 6-8.
[18] J.F. Fleet, "Eran Stone Pillar Inscription of Budhagupta. The Year 165," *CII* III (1888), p. 89, line 2.
[19] J.F. Fleet, "Udayagiri Cave Inscription of Chandragupta II," *CII* III (1888), p. 35, line 2.
[20] F. Kielhorn, "Khalimpur Plate of Dharmapaladeva," *EI* IV (1896-97), p. 248, lines 10-11; translation on p. 251, verse 6.
[21] K.V. Ramesh and S.S. Iyer, "Māldā District Museum Copper-plate Charter of Mahendrapāladeva," Year 7," *EI* XLII (1977-78), p. 19, lines 4-5.
[22] R.D. Banerji, "The Amgachhi Grant of Vigraha-Pala III; The 12th Year, *EI* XV (1919-20), p. 298, line 48.
[23] J.F. Fleet, "Khoh Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Hastin; The Year 156," *CII* III (1888), p. 99. Fleet's translation has been slightly modified.

The passage is interesting for several reasons, but for our purpose, it suffices to pointout the elements constituting the relationship between king and earth. The Sanskrit for 'best of kings' has *mahi(hī)ṃ mahīmatāṃ śreṣṭha*,[24] and *mahīmat* literally means "possessed of the earth."[25] The translator of the plate correctly rendered the term with 'king', for it is in fact he who possesses the earth who is king. Vyāsa again refers to kings as the future guarantors of the grant, as they will then be in possession of the earth. The expression "to whomever earth belongs, to him shall go the merit" (*yasya yasya yadā bhūmis tasya tasya tadā phalaṃ*)[26] seems particularly relevant for the point I am making. What merit does a king gain by respecting a previously given grant? The king is the actual owner of the earth, and thus fully entitled to the revenue from all the lands of his kingdom. In protecting a previous grant, therefore, he increases his merit because he deprives himself of what he could lawfully have. As we will see, this merit also and necessarily entailed the grateful loyalty of donees. Apparently, this verse was widely diffused and circulated, as it is found in the corresponding imprecatory sections of all the Pāla copper-plates.[27]

It is apparent then that in the list of individual land owners we must include the king himself. The king however was a proprietor of a particular kind since his possessions comprised the entirety of his kingdom which ideally girdled the whole of the earth. This of course did not exclude the possibility that a king may have owned, in the same way as other land lords did, a particular holding. In fact, in at least seven of the fourteen Pāla copperplates[28] we find the expression "*sva-sambaddh-āvicchinna-tal-opeta*" which qualifies some or all of the land being granted. D.C. Sircar renders it as "land that pertains to the king's own self and has its ground not yet alienated,"[29] i.e. with no other owners holding titles to the same land.

At this point it is clear that none of the three possible choices mentioned at the start of our discussion can do justice to the kind of complex evidence we are confronting. In fact, before answering the question 'who owned land in India' we have

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[24] *Ibid.*, p. 96, line 17.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 99, footnote 1.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 96, line 18.
[27] See, for instance, F. Kielhorn, "The Mungir Copper-plate Grant of Devapaladeva," *The Indian Antiquary* (*IA*) XXI (Sept. 1892), p. 257, line 48.
[28] *Ibid.*, p. 256, line 30; Hirananda Shastri, "The Nalanda Copper-plate of Devapaladeva," *EI* XVII (1923-24), p. 321, line 26; R.C. Majumdar and P.N. Misra, "The Jājilpārā Grant of Gopāla II, Year 6," *Journal of the Asiatic Society. Letters* (*JAS.L*) XVII.2 (1951), p. 142, line 22; R.D. Banerji, "The Bangarh Grant of Mahi-Pala I: The 9th Year," *EI* XIV (1917-18), p. 327, line 31; Mahīpāla I and Vigrahapāla III's Belwa plates in D.C. Sircar, "Two Plates from Belwa," *EI* XXIX (1951-52), p. 7, lines 28-29 and p. 11, lines 28-29; Banerji, "The Amgachhi Grant of Vigraha-Pala III: The 12th Year," *EI* XV, p. 297, line 25.
[29] Sircar, "Two Plates from Belwa," *EI* XXIX, p. 4.

first to ask 'what ownership was in India'. The answer to this question is not made any easier by the fact that even the *smṛti* writers do not seem to have been interested in defining ownership (*svatva*) as such,[30] being much more concerned with its actual manifestations. If Derrett is correct it is only from the 13th century that the question is forcefully taken up.[31] Prior to this the jurists' material on the nature of *svatva* was mixed. Apart from *smṛtis*, custom also constituted another important source of law and for this reason, references to medieval Indian legal literature alone cannot fully bear out any given social practice. The *smṛtis* never occupied the place constitutions or positive law in general occupy in modern states. They were subjected to continuous updating to meet the challenge of new practical problems. This explains the serious differences and contradictions found in various texts and even within single texts themselves. To return to our question, from Derrett's painstaking analysis of the countless cases in which property manifests itself, we may highlight at least one element which somehow constituted the reality of property. It seems that *svatva* was necessarily linked to the notion of 'right' (*adhikāra*) intended both as the right of doing something and of receiving something.[32] This *adhikāra* however was not related or did not necessarily imply independence in the sense of legal freedom (*svātantrya*). Some owners were indeed independent; but some others were not, and yet had possessions.[33] Furthermore, *adhikāra* itself was not a univocal concept, so that a number of *adhikāras* and hence *adhikāris* could coexist in respect of one and the same thing. Custom, age, gender, social standing, physical fitness, moral disabilities, etc. all contributed to the creation and recreation of rights and hence to the possibility of exercising ownership over things.[34]

The existence of a multiplicity of these rights implied that a thing could be owned by several people all at once, not in the sense of each one of them having a share in it, but in the sense of exercising real ownership rights of *different character*. And this was true to the extent that *svatva* could exist simultaneously even when *adhikāras* were not only inconsistent with one another but also mutually exclusive.[35] "In respect of a piece of land there might be as many as five concurrent *svatvas*: those of

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[30] J.M. Duncan Derrett, "The Development of the Concept of Property in India c. AD 800-1800," *Essays in Classical and Modern Hindu Law* 2 (Leiden, 1977), p. 24.
[31] *Ibid.*, p. 25.
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 28ff.
[33] See examples in *ibid.*, pp. 30; 95-101.
[34] *Ibid.*, pp. 33; 73.
[35] *Ibid.*, p. 93.

the king, ultimate proprietor and receiver of land-revenue and other profits from each tenure; of the *mūla-svāmī* or *bhaumika*, the land-holder, payer of land-revenue; of the mortgagee to whom he has mortgaged it; of the sub-mortgagee to whom the mortgagee had sub-mortgaged it; and finally of the cultivator to whom the sub-mortgagee has leased it."[36] All the five people involved in the chain were *svāmīs*, each of a different character. Amazing as it may seem, though the *mūla-svāmī* may have mortgaged the possession of his land, he could still retain rights of ownership. This is because beyond the *adhikāra* of possession which he alienated with the concession of the mortgage, he continued to maintain other *adhikāras*.[37]

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that in early medieval North and North-eastern India we find a regime of multiple ownership of land with, at its basis, a practice of property which is not exclusive but concurrent and inclusive. It is this legal framework which eventually organised, gave content to and constituted the economic relations of production. The agrarian structure of the region and the particular form of appropriation of surplus would remain unexplainable without such property relations. It remains, however, to be disclosed why certain people had certain *adhikāras* and certain others did not. In other words, we must attempt an explanation of why *kṣettrakaras* had to pay rent to their *kuṭumbin* land owners in the first place, or, to put it in another way, why *kuṭumbins* had the *adhikāra* of receiving rent from the *kṣettrakaras*.

2.2 *Dharma* as the horizon of *adhikāras*

First it must be recognised that this problem cannot be answered by simply referring to physical coercion. The relationship between simple land owners and tillers of the soil did not necessarily imply lordship, so that it is not at all clear if *kuṭumbins* and *mahattaras* had the capability of exerting coercive violence on *kṣettrakaras*. Furthermore, if we consider that many early medieval Indian dynasties, like the Pālas, ruled for centuries before disappearing, it would be unrealistic to maintain that such remarkable stability could have been founded on a continuous threat and use of violence.

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[36] *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

[37] Another insightful example is reported by Derrett in the following words: "When an individual or family 'released' a tank, or a well or some other facility for the public's use they did not destroy their own *adhikāras* of enjoyment, though they created what appears to have been the equivalent of an irrevocable general licence:" *ibid.*, p. 91.

The agrarian relations and the differential distribution of *adhikāras* they entailed were established on what might be called the 'cosmo-moral order' of early medieval India. The term is meant as a rendering of the complex Indian notion of *dharma*.[38] For our purpose it suffices to say that *dharma* is 'the order of things', the way they are and the way they should be.[39] Thus, *dharma* refers on the one hand to the nature of things, their internal constitution and their external correlation; and on the other to their activity and functioning. To say that something is the *dharma* of something else, is to indicate the correct behaviour of that thing in accordance with its intrinsic nature.[40] Both the latter and the former are the *dharma* of that thing. Nothing and nobody can be thought of as beyond *dharma*, neither gods, nor humans, nor animals nor plants. In theory, such a cosmo-moral order is unchangeable and disruption entails total chaos. It is in this concept that we may find a contextualisation and hence an explanation of *adhikāra* and its differential distribution among men. *Adhikāra* in the context of *dharma* can in fact be translated as 'competency' or 'entitlement', and it refers to that which is specifically appropriate to the nature (*dharma*) of a particular thing. Among humans, *dharma* is also the principle of social organisation and as such, it comes to be known as *varṇāśramadharma*, that is, the duties (*dharma*) determined by one's social class (*varṇa*) and stage of life (*āśrama*). According to this principle people are organised into four major groups (*varṇa*, i.e. colours).[41] Other groups however do exist and are considered to be the result of intermarriages between people belonging to one or the other of the four principal *varṇas*. Indeed, the *varṇa* template not only organises social relations, but also classifies the whole of the cosmos in groups of

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[38] The definition of *dharma* used in this section as cosmo-moral order, is borrowed from R. Inden, "Lordship and Caste in Hindu Discourse," Richard Burghart and Audrey Cantlie eds., *Indian Religion* (London, 1985), pp. 159-79.

[39] A brief but comprehensive survey of the meanings of the concept of *dharma* together with its historical transformations can be found in William K. Mahony, "Dharma," Mircea Eliade ed., *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* 4 (London, 1987), pp. 329-32.

[40] *Dharma* does not necessarily imply a value judgement on the morality of a specific act. In this the notion does not quite correspond to the concept of 'right' and 'good' in Judaeo-Christian tradition.

[41] The literature on the subject is extensive. I would like to point out the following works: R. Inden and Mc. Marriot, "Caste," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 3 (Chicago, 1978), pp. 982-91, for caste origin and historical evolution; R. Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford, 1990), specifically chapter 2, for the treatment of caste in historiography; A.M. Hocart, *Caste: A Comparative Study* (London, 1950), for a 'functional' and 'political' interpretation of caste *vis à vis* the state.

elements whose commonality is determined by the ontological preponderance in each one of them of one or the other quality called *guṇas*,[42] the stuff which everything is made of.[43]

Leaving aside the wider implications of the *varṇa* template and concentrating instead on its relevance for social differentiation and stratification, we find that in a kingdom (*rājya*)[44] four major classes of people exist: the *śūdras*, the *vaiśyas*, the *kṣatriyas* and the *brāhmaṇas*. The latter three are also called twice born (*dvija*) to distinguish them from the *śūdras* who, not having received initiation, are only once born. The point is that, in theory, to belong to one of the four *varṇas* was immediately to enter a hierarchical world in which competencies, rights, fields of activity etc. were already settled and preordained. *Varṇa* belonging, in short, provided the framework for relations of lordship and mastery among people.

The *śūdras* were the lowest of the four castes and their *adhikāras* were the least of all. Not being entitled to initiation, they were completely excluded from Vedic studies and the knowledge issuing from them. Their *adhikāras* merely extended over their body, perhaps the only real domain for their mastery. The service of the three higher *varṇas* was their only true entitlement and competency. To this estate belonged also a number of mixed castes, usually associated with crafts and arts. Like any 'true *śūdra*' they had mastery only over their body as the instrument for their livelihood, a working tool. In a very debased conception, a *śūdra* was not even considered the master of his own household, wife and children since the twice-born whom he served was the real master. In the same way, a *śūdra* could not own anything, whatever he had belonged to the lord at whose service he was.[45]

The *vaiśyas* were the lowest among the *dvija*. But as such they had a status well above that of the *śūdras*. This was the estate of the commoners and in a kingdom they constituted the ordinary people. In texts and in inscriptions they may have been referred to as *prajā* or *jana*. They had a certain access to the Vedas and their

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[42] The *guṇas* are infinite in number but they are combined to form three specific conglomerates again called *guṇas*: *tamas*, *rajas* and *sattva*. They, generally speaking, indicate respectively dull darkness, stirring activity and quiescent goodness. The theory of the *guṇas* has been treated in different ways by the different Indian schools of thought. Here I refer to the treatment of the guṇas as it is laid out in Sāṃkhya philosophy. See S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy* 2 (Delhi, 1st edition 1923, paperback 1996), pp. 262-65.

[43] A good treatment of the *varṇa* system as a system for classifying the universe can be found in Brian K. Smith, *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varṇa System and the Origins of Caste* (New York, 1994).

[44] The *varṇas* cannot but exist in a kingdom. The point will be taken up again below.

[45] W. Doniger with B.K. Smith trs., *The Laws of Manu* (London, 1991), VII.412-417.

knowledge. The domain of their *adhikāras* was wider than that of the *śūdras*. Their specific competence extended not only over their bodies but also over their own household and movable wealth in general. Agriculture, cow-herding, animal husbandry together with commerce were their natural and moral (i.e. lawful) entitlements. As such a *vaiśya* could own things ranging from animals to articles of trade and pecuniary wealth.

The *kṣatriyas* were the warrior and princely estate. Their *dharma* was the protection of the people (*prajā*). In a kingdom the king and other lords were supposed to be *kṣatriyas*. Specifically, they were lords of the people and lords of the land. Their knowledge was a military one based on their mastery over weapons and their use. The purpose of a *kṣatriya*'s activity was not the accumulation of wealth but the increase of fame through relentless fighting. The domain of a *kṣatriya*'s mastery included that of the *vaiśyas*, but unlike theirs, it also comprised immovable wealth, namely, land. Thus a *kṣatriya* could own whatever was in his kingdom or in his share of it. In a way, his lordship comprised and subsumed the lordships and competencies (*adhikāras*) together with the domains of their exercise, of *śūdras* and *vaiśyas* and was as such more complete then theirs.

The last estate, the *brāhmaṇas*, was at the top of the hierarchy and was made up of the religious specialists. *Brāhmaṇas* had mastery over the Vedas and their knowledge in a way which was impossible for the other *dvijas*. Their monopoly on Vedic knowledge made them the masters of sacrifices, which were the acts *par excellence* sustaining the cosmo-moral order.[46] As such they were lords and their lordship extended over *kṣatriyas* and their domains as well. To a *brāhmaṇa*, in theory, belonged the whole cosmos, being himself the knower of *brahman*, the absolute, and being, in a meaningful way, that *brahman* itself. Within this conceptual framework, any donation of land or anything else to a *brāhmaṇa* was to be considered as an act of restitution: that gift in fact was already his, by virtue of the particular entitlement (*adhikāra*) residing in him as his inherent natural characteristic.[47]

The *varṇa* system as summarily described above and derived basically from *dharmaśāstric* literature was not however a static model. A variety of actual contexts transformed the system and the interaction with other forms of stratification complicated its articulation and functioning. Within each and every estate further

[46] In fact, every act if carried out according to one's own *dharma* sustained the universe and its order.
[47] Inden, "Lordship and Caste in Hindu Discourse," p. 175.

subdivisions became possible so that *śūdras*, *vaiśyas*, *kṣatriyas* and *brāhmaṇas* did not belong in the same way to their respective class. In early medieval India *sat-śūdras* were distinct from *asat-śūdras* and were considered of a superior rank. Distinctions were again introduced on the basis of actual occupation. Ruling *kṣatriyas*, for instance, were then termed *sat* (true) as opposed to other *kṣatriyas* which such by birth were not occupying a ruling position. Among the *brāhmaṇas* diversity was more variegated. Not all of them in fact were masters of the Vedas. The top ranking were certainly the *śrotriya brāhmaṇas*, the specialists of the Vedas who lived on this knowledge. Many others however were employed in different activities from commerce to agriculture, from temple activities to court proceedings.[48] Individual affiliation to Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava religions constituted again another criterion of ranking particularly *vis à vis* the religious affiliation of a particular king.

Lordship and mastery themselves, which I believe were articulated and distributed on the basis of the *varṇa* template, also depended on other variables such as age, gender, kinship relations etc., which, within the *varṇa* system, modified and repositioned the order of ranking. All considered, however, the *varṇa* template provided at least two elements which were important and necessary to the organisation and constitution of early medieval Indian social formations. The first, lordship and hence ownership was firmly linked to a cosmo-moral order which clearly pre-established and pre-ordained the competencies and rights of every member of a society on the basis of ontological constituents. Eventually, if it was true that only a *kṣatriya* could become king, it was equally true, for logical necessity, that a king was and could not but necessarily be a *kṣatriya* whatever his status at birth.[49]

The second important element of the *varṇa* system is that it provided a social formation with a powerful tool for social ranking. Whatever the number of estates, the *varṇa* template was made capable of producing a clear hierarchy of ranks. This hierarchy was encompassing in nature so that a member of the highest estate encompassed within the domain of his competencies and rights, all the other domains and competencies of estates underneath his. The *varṇa* system thus ordered a hierarchy

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[48] For the complexity of castes configuration in early medieval India, see Yadava, *Society and Culture...*, chapter 1.

[49] Although I do not expect to find much literary evidence for such an argument it is interesting to note that the *Bṛhaddharma Purāṇa*, a work from 13th century Bengal, does make *in passim* a reference to it. The beginning of chapter 3 of the *Uttara Khaṇḍa* starts with *rājā kṣatriya iti uktaḥ* which is commented upon by Hazra with the following words: "the expression [...] tends to show that to whatever caste a king might belong he was always regarded as a *kṣatriya*." The Sanskrit expression together with the comment are found in R.C. Hazra, *Studies in the Upapuranas* 2 (Calcutta, 1963), p. 429, footnote 136.

of lordships where "lords were carefully *distinguished from* their inferiors but at the same time also *included within themselves* these inferiors."[50] The kind of mastery a *brāhmaṇa* was entitled to comprised in fact the single masteries of the *kṣatriya* down to that of the *vaiśya*.[51] What in *dharmaśāstras* is called *āpaddharma*, the rules for those in particular situations of distress, is but an illustration of this principle. A *brāhmaṇa* who finds himself unable to earn a living according to the rules of his *varṇa* is allowed to take up lower occupations. But this is possible precisely because in him those occupations are latent, subsumed as it were in his particular nature.[52]

In sum, I would like to suggest that the agrarian relations of early medieval North and North-eastern Indian social formations, our topic at hand, were informed, constituted and established on the *varṇa* template, and particularly on the two elements highlighted above. The encompassing notion of lordship the *varṇa* template articulated, is sufficient to make sense of the notion of multiple ownership introduced to describe the agrarian structure of early medieval social formations. At the same time its cosmo-theological foundation gives us a clue to understanding the pattern of distribution of ownership rights and the entitlement of single individuals to one or the other forms of property. In other words, the *varṇa* template together with its cosmo-theological underlining, constituted the framework for the economic relations of production in early medieval North and North-eastern India. The dominance of this ideology was itself the result of a social configuration which saw the site of the economic occupied by what we today call 'religion'. The religious world-view was not 'superimposed' on economic relations as if it were something different from them, but was itself those economic relations. The religious provided here the language and the categories for the economic. It is irrelevant that in our case it was the religious/cosmological which provided the framework for the material appropriation of nature.[53] In this respect, I wish to reiterate the point that the encompassing form of lordship described above ordered not only social relations but also the cosmos as such. Far from being a sort of

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[50] Daud Ali, "Cosmos, Realm and Property in Early Medieval Kingdoms," unpublished paper (1999), p. 9.

[51] The *śūdra*'s *adhikāra* does not exist beyond service to the twice-born, so it would be contradictory and defiling for a *brāhmaṇa* or any other twice-born to engage in such a service. Where instead *śūdras' adhikāras* are conceived as to include arts and crafts in the space of their domain, their masteries too can be thought of as subsumed into the space of competencies of members of higher estates.

[52] Says Manu: "But a priest who cannot make a living by his own innate activity...may make his living by fulfilling the duty of a ruler, for he is the very next lower class. And if (this question) should arise: 'What if he cannot make a living by either of these two (livelihoods)?', he may make his living by farming and tending livestock, the livelihood of the commoner (*Manu*, X.81-82)." In the following verses of the same chapter X, rules for *kṣatriyas*, *vaiśyas* and even *śūdras* in distress are given on the basis of the same principle.

[53] Godelier, *The Mental and the Material*, pp. 142-48.

symbolic or mythic representation of the universe, lordship constituted its very real and physical substance. Indeed, lordship was the matter, as it were, of which reality was made and linked all that existed in a complex chain of being.[54]

Having said this we cannot expect to find in our sources the exact empirical translation of the *varṇa* system as described above. What we do find in them is the application of a template which provided a model for social relations.[55] Some examples will clarify the point. It is known that both the Gupta and Pāla dynasties had obscure beginnings. In the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, it is said that the termination 'Gupta' is appropriate to the *vaiśyas*.[56] Although this is the only reference we can rely upon, there is a high probability that these kings were not of *kṣatriya* origins. However, it is all the same clear that in their eulogies the Gupta kings are indeed depicted in *kṣatriya* fashion. Samudragupta, among others, is eulogised for the protection afforded to the people,[57] for his military prowess,[58] for his fame,[59] etc. all characteristics which belong to the inner nature of the *kṣatriyas*. Similarly, it seems that Gopāla, the first Pāla dynast, was not of royal blood. The royal charters of the Pālas do not give any clear information on his descent. Tāranātha speaks of Gopāla as the son of a *kṣatriya* mother.[60] According to the *Rāmacarita*, on the contrary, Dharmapāla was "the light of the *Samudra*'s race (*samudra-kula-dīpa*)."[61] Again, in the Kamauli copperplate of Vaidyadeva,[62] a former minister of king Kumārapāla, Vigrahapāla III is said to have belonged to the solar race. A similar reference is also found in one of the earlier Pāla grants. In that case the epithet 'lustrous race' is attributed specifically to the Sugata, and indirectly to Gopāla.[63] Whatever the case of Pāla origins, it is again clear that this line of kings interpreted

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[54] For the relation between chain of lordships and chain of being in early medieval India, with reference to the *purāṇic* elaboration where such relationship is conceptualised, see Ali, Cosmos, Realm and Property in Early Medieval Kingdoms."

[55] It is doubtful that in any given time and place of Indian history the *varṇa* system, as described in the *śāstras*, concretely materialised in the form of the four castes.

[56] Quoted in J.F. Fleet, "Allahabad Posthumous Stone Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta," *CII* III (1888), p. 11, footnote 1. The reference of course is non-conclusive, but the fact that the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* is dated to the Gupta period, may lend some credit to the statement.

[57] Fleet, "Allahabad Posthumous Stone Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta," *CII* III (1888), p. 12, line 9-10.

[58] *Ibid.*, p. 12, lines 11; 13; 17-18 *passim*.

[59] *Ibid.*, p. 14, line 23; p. 16, line 30.

[60] D. Chattopadhyaya ed., *Tāranātha's History of Buddhism in India* (Delhi, reprint 1990), p. 257.

[61] Haraprasad Sastri ed., *Rāmacaritam of Sandhyākaranandin* (Calcutta, 1969), I.4AB. In this passage the poet plays with words which refer to both Ikṣvāku and Dharmapāla at the same time; Dharmapāla is then said to belong to the race of the ocean but to belong also to the solar dynasty of Ikṣvāku. See also Jhunu Bagchi, *The History and Culture of the Pālas of Bengal and Bihar* (New Delhi, 1993), p. 37.

[62] Arthur Venis, "Copper-plate Grant of Vaidyadeva, King of Kāmarūpa," *EI* II (1894), p. 354, verse 2.

[63] Ramesh and Iyer, "Māldā District Museum Copper-plate Charter of Mahendrapāladeva, Year 7," *EI* XLII, p. 24, verse 1.

themselves as *kṣatriyas*. What is more, if we give credit to both the *Rāmacarita* and Vaidyadeva, the claim of 'kṣatriyahood' became for the Pālas a later acquisition, a kind of *post-factum* appropriation of their role as monarchs. In this particular case the *varṇa* template was used and made to serve the royal function.

The *varṇa* system however is traceable in our sources in a more specific fashion. We have already quoted above a passage from the *Mahābhārata* which was widely employed in early medieval Indian epigraphs. There Yudhiṣṭhira was exhorted to "carefully preserve land that [had] previously been given to the twice-born."[64] The term *dvija*, we know, refers specifically to the three higher *varṇas*. In early medieval India however the term came to be associated more and more exclusively with the *brāhmaṇas*. Be it as it may, in both characterisations the use of this term in relation to grants of land is significant. A king had to protect grants to the twice-born because they were entitled to them by *adhikāra*. Conversely, at least the *śūdras* do not appear here as possible recipients of grants for their *adhikāras* did not entitle them to land ownership. This, of course, did not imply the exclusion of the *śūdras* from agricultural activities. On the contrary, they might indeed have constituted the bulk of the agricultural labour force,[65] and they might even have had some kind of ownership rights on the land they cultivated. But what they were excluded from was royal protection which by itself made their land tenures highly insecure. They may have enjoyed it on occasions, but their being *śūdras* constituted an excuse for harassment. The Belwa grant of Mahīpāla I may represent an illustration of the point discussed here. There it is said that king Mahīpāla granted three plots of land to a *brāhmaṇa*. One of these three plots was called *Ausinna-Kaivartta-vṛtti*,[66] that is, Ausinna, the land from which the Kaivartas, a *śūdra* caste, earned their living. We do not know if at the time of the grant the Kaivartas were still cultivating that land, but in either of the two possibilities the fact that it was transferred certainly indicates that the kind of tenure the Kaivartas were enjoying was not of a stable kind.

It was the *varṇa* template with its cosmological foundation and the differential distribution of *adhikāras* it entailed which regulated social relations. In the charters this is apparent when we consider that all the donees of early medieval Indian grants were *brāhmaṇas* or religious institutions connected to them. *Brāhmaṇas*, because of their

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[64] See footnote 23 above.

[65] The transformation of *śūdras* in cultivators is considered by some authors as a characteristic of early medieval economic developments in India. See Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, pp. 62-63; Yadava, *Society and Culture...*, pp. 14-15; 40-41.

[66] Sircar, "Two Pala Plates from Belwa," *EI* XXIX, p. 7, line 29.

specific connection with *brahman*, had the highest kind of *adhikāras* and kings of different sorts duly recognised and supported this through religious donations. The recognition of the *brāhmaṇas'* right was itself the recognition of the system of which they were the ideological head. Without *varṇāśramadharma* it would indeed be difficult to explain why *brāhmaṇas* along the centuries remained the fixed and only recipients of land grants. Besides, *varṇāśramadharma* as a category in itself does show up in our inscriptions. From the Gupta period onwards the protection and enforcement of its tenets appear as one or possibly the most important duty of monarchs. In the charter of the Parivrājaka king Saṃkṣobha (AD 528-529), the *mahārāja* Hastin is said to have been intent "upon establishing the religious duties of the castes and the different periods of life."[67] Similarly, Dharmapāla in the Mungir copper-plate of his son Devapāla is said to have made "the castes conform to their proper tenets."[68] A similar reference is also found in the copperplates of Vigrahapāla III. In his Amgachhi grant, for instance, he is said to have been "a supporter of the four castes."[69] Although in Gupta royal inscriptions such clear references to *varṇāśramadharma* are altogether missing, other expressions might have conveyed the same meaning. Samudragupta, for instance, is said to have "upholded meaning and principles of *śāstras*,"[70] which have *varṇāśramadharma* as their centrepiece.

To sum up, it seems that in the early medieval period *varṇāsramadharma* functioned not only as a moral order but also as the framework of economic relations of production. Its dominance as an ideological structure was determined by its latter role. It was its articulation of lordship and mastery on the basis of inherent natural *adhikāras* which organised the relations of production in early medieval social formations.

3. Lordship, *varṇāśramadharma* and the king

A king as a *kṣatriya* had by nature particular endowments and attributes. These defined both his *adhikāras* and the field where these were exerted. Attributes, *adhikāras* and fields of action together constituted his *dharma*. In a meaningful way, the three

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[67] J.F. Fleet, "Khoh Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Samkshobha. The Year 209," *CII* III (1888), p. 116, lines 9-10.
[68] Kielhorn, "The Mungir Copper-plate Grant of Devapaladeva," *IA* XXI, p. 257, line 8.
[69] Banerji, "The Amgachhi Grant of Vigraha-Pala III: the 12th Year," *EI* XV, p. 300, verse 13.
[70] *sāstra-tattv-ārttha-bharttuḥ*: Fleet, "Allahabad Posthumous Stone Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta," *CII* III (1888), p. 6, line 5.

elements were the inherent and innate characteristics of being a *kṣatriya*. The field of action, which was the space of a *kṣatriya*/king lordship, was in a way encompassed by his actual person as if it were an extension of his physical body. As we will see below, there were in fact very strict parallelisms between what a king was and did and the actual condition of his kingdom.

Of course, what we are saying of a *kṣatriya*/king was true also for people belonging to one or the other of the remaining three *varṇas*. *Dharma* specified in fact characteristics, *adhikāras* and fields of action of other people too. The particularity of each and every one resided only in the difference between *adhikāras* and domains of lordship one was entitled to. The actual working of the system was the same throughout, so that *dharmic* actions were good because they preserved and fostered the cosmo-moral order.

Preservation and fostering were, however, differential. In this respect sacrificial and ritual actions performed by *brāhmaṇas*, for instance, were the actions *par excellence*, while actions performed by *śūdras* worked in the same way, but had a much lower impact in the work of supporting *dharma*. In the same way royal deeds were *dharmic* when carried out in accord with *dharma*. However, a king's actions had a specific and unique meaning and function for the whole of the system. A *kṣatriya*/king was endowed, because of his intrinsic nature, with the duty of protecting *dharma*. So if in a way he was a *kṣatriya* because of his specific *dharma*, in another way it was because of him that *dharma* as a cosmo-moral order could operate. *Varṇāśramadharma* could not be enforced but in a kingdom, under the protection, as it were, of a king. So much so that in *śāstric* discourse the *dharma* of the king (*rājadharma*) is given the highest pre-eminence and priority among the many *dharmas*.[71]

A first conclusion can therefore be drawn: above I have stated that the *varṇa* template articulated the notion of lordship in early medieval India; but now I must also add that it was lordship which articulated the *varṇa* system itself. *Dharma* in general and *varṇāśramadharma* in particular became entangled with kingship so that in early medieval India we cannot conceive of one without the other. The references quoted above from post-Gupta sources become now fully meaningful: kings enforcing *varṇadharma* were not simply manifesting their religious piety, but were first and foremost constituting and articulating what we may like to call a state. Little wonder

[71] References in P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra* 3 (Poona, 1946), pp. 3-4.

then that in *purāṇic* literature the distinction between king and state is not found[72] for the discourse on the state is completely absorbed by the discourse on kingship, and the nature of the state is rehearsed in and exhausted by the duties of the king. In the *Purāṇas* in fact, *rājadharma* is all there is to say about the state. It goes without saying then that to understand the early medieval Indian state, we cannot but look at the person of the king. As a matter of fact, the nature of such a state did not exist as a separate entity from the nature of kingship itself and its bearer.

Thus, by virtue of his inner nature a *kṣatriya*/king was entitled to a series of *adhikāras* among which the most important were protection (*rakṣaṇa*) and sustenance (*pālana*). Such functions were often expressed with terms like 'protector of men' (*nṛpa*), 'herdsman' (*goptṛ*), 'protector or guardian of the earth' (*bhūpa* or *bhūpāla*) which are basically synonyms and rightly translated in English with the word 'king'.[73] The protection a king afforded his kingdom however was not merely a kind of benevolent disposition towards people and things, but was itself the specific protection of *dharma* and the system of relations it governed.[74] To do so a king could have employed force and constriction, what in Sanskrit is called *daṇḍa*. In fact it was the specific competence of a *kṣatriya* to be master in martial arts and proficient in the use of weapons. These characteristics of a king's activity were once again his personal *dharma* and in the service of *dharma*.[75] When protection and force were missing the consequences were disastrous. According to the *Bṛhaddharma Purāṇa*,

> In the absence of *daṇḍa*, men would turn haughty and kill animals, men and sacrificial preys; the crows would eat *puroḍāśa* and the dogs the objects of sacrifice. No ownership of anything would be possible, nor would be there any gradation of high and low. The four *varṇas* would totter before the oppression of the haughty. It is by *daṇḍa*, as such, that all are sustained and those who are pursuing *dharma* are protected. For fear of *daṇḍa* again, men become law-abiding and desist from evil deeds.[76]

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[72] See Om Prakash, *Political Ideas in the Purāṇas* (Allahabad, 1977), p. 96.
[73] See J. Gonda, "Ancient Indian Kingship from a Religious Point of View," part I, *Numen* 3 (1956), p. 37.
[74] References in *ibid.*, pp. 37-41.
[75] The two words are here used in two different meanings. The *dharma* of a king is the individualised form of *Dharma* as the cosmo-moral order. In this sense we may say that *Dharma* is one but the single *dharmas* are many. In this respect B.D. Chattopadhyaya argues that "the wide range of *dharmas* cannot be considered to have constituted law for the state;" but he does not say either why or what then held the early medieval Indian state together. See B.D. Chattopadhyaya, "'Autonomous Spaces' and the Authority of the State: the Contradiction and its Resolution in Theory and Practice in Early India," B. Kölver ed., *Recht, Staat und Verwaltung in Klassichen Indien* (München, 1997), pp. 1-14, here p. 10.
[76] *Bṛhaddharma*, II.3.15-19, quoted in Prakash, *Political Ideas in the Purāṇas*, p. 43.

Notably, the absence of a king not only causes a breakdown in law and order, but it crystallises a situation close to a kind of cosmic collapse. For our purpose then it is meaningful that the impossibility of ownership in such a situation is mentioned right beside the confusion between high and low and the tottering of the four *varṇas*. In fact the destruction of the laws of property is lawlessness and lawlessness is the tottering of the four *varṇas*. In *purāṇic* narrative such a situation is often referred to as both *arājaka* and *mātsyanyāya*. While the former term specifically, though not always, points to a state of 'kingslessness' the latter highlights a situation in which 'smaller fish are devoured by bigger ones'.[77] Significantly this same expression is found in one of Dharmapāla's charters. There it is said that Gopāla, the first dynast of the Pāla family, was made king by the people (*prakṛtis*) "to put an end to the practice of fishes (*mātsyanyāya*)."[78] The event there recorded far from revealing a sort of democratic practice[79] simply refers to Gopāla as the king who enforced *varṇāśramadharma*. This is in fact the context in which *mātsyanyāya* appears in Kāmandaka's *Nītisāra*.[80] After having introduced the king as the protector of *varṇāśramadharma* (vv. 34-35) Kāmandaka states that a king withholding proper chastisement causes *mātsyanyāya* to set in (v. 40). Interestingly the relationship in this world among beings is said to be as that of food and consumer (v. 40). *Mātsyanyāya* is thus the subversion of that relationship's order. In a way *mātsyanyāya* is the anti-*varṇa* system, the disruption of competencies and rights as defined in the four estates. Paradoxically, the violation of the established order of property is perceived of as injustice.

Ownership, as we know, was defined by the inherent *adhikāras* of a person. These at the same time delimited the space or domain of competence on which one could exert and exercise his lordship. For a king, of course, that domain was his kingdom and all it comprised. The relation between kingdom and king was often expressed with titles like 'master of the earth' (*bhūpati*), 'supporter of the earth' (*bhūbhṛta*), 'lord of the earth' (*bhūmīśvara*), etc. Many of these terms, (i.e. *pati*, *bhartṛ* and *śvāmin*) also conveyed the idea of mastery as of a husband over his wife. In fact

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[77] See the *Mātsya Purāṇa*, 225.8-17, quoted in Prakash, *Political Ideas in the Purāṇas*, p. 42.
[78] Kielhorn, "Khalimpur Plate of Dharmapaladeva," *EI* IV, p. 251, verse 4.
[79] Such a reading can be found in Sircar, *Studies in the Political and Administrative Systems...*, pp. 236-46; R.C. Majumdar, *History of Ancient Bengal* (Calcutta, 1971), p. 95.
[80] M.N. Dutt tr., *Kamandakiya Nitisara* (Calcutta, 1896). *Mātsyanyāya* is mentioned in II.40. The whole of section II is relevant to our argument; see also R.P. Kangle tr., The *Kauṭilīya Arthaśāstra* (Bombay, 1963), 1.4.13-14, and 1.13.5 In-text quotations refer to verses of the same section of the *Nītisāra*. The latter is a manual of politics variously dated to the 8th century or later.

these titles found their best explanatory context in the fairly common[81] metaphor which sees the king married to the earth. We may even suggest that it was the relationship between husband and wife which metaphorically articulated the early medieval Indian notion of lordship.[82] In the same way a householder has mastery over his wife, and hence protects, supports and enjoys her, a king protects, supports and enjoys the earth often portrayed as a goddess (Pṛthivī). These three verbs define both the space of a king's domain, or space of influence (*viṣaya*)[83] and the degree or level of ownership/lordship he is entitled to. The Sanskrit root *bhuj* (to enjoy) is often found in early medieval sources in its derivative forms, among which *bhukti* is fairly common. Both *viṣaya* and *bhukti* are nearly always improperly translated as kinds of administrative and territorial divisions.[84] In reality they did not have anything to do with 'administration' but were simply the fields of enjoyment of particular lords and kings. *Bhūbhojana* or the enjoyment of the earth was then the specific *adhikāra* of a king which qualified him as the full owner of the earth. And "so long as the king [treated] his 'wife' in a husbandly fashion he [was] acting distinctly in accordance with *dharma*."[85]

In passim it may be seen now that in the same way in which *varṇāśramadharma* could not exist without a king and a kingdom, the concept of multiple ownership of land could not by itself make sense without the previous statement of the king's ownership of all the land. Because the king was a kind of *'bhogapati'* (master of enjoyments), others could have had a specific right (i.e. *bhoga*) in something. In fact we may extend the metaphor and consider individual *adhikāras* as a number of *bhogas* which were partitioned and apportioned according to the *varṇa* template. Ownership, intended as enjoyment of the thing owned, organised a hierarchical chain of lords distinct from each other for the quantity and quality of *bhogas* possessed. And at the top

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[81] The same story of Pṛthu, the first king, and the earth (Pṛthivī) can be read as a conjugal metaphor. See J. Gonda, "Ancient Indian Kingship from the Religious Point of View," part IV, *Numen* 4.1 (1957), pp. 127; 149-52. Other references in J. Duncan M. Derrett, "Bhū-Bharaṇa, Bhū-Pālana, Bhū-Bhojana: an Indian Conundrum," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* XXII.1 (1959), p. 112.
[82] Derrett, "Bhū-Bharaṇa, Bhū-Pālana, Bhū-Bhojana...," p. 112ff.
[83] Inden, "Lordship and Caste in Hindu Discourse," p. 162.
[84] *Viṣaya* is rendered with 'district', and *bhukti* with 'division'. Many instances of these can be easily found by browsing through the pages of *Epigraphia Indica*.
[85] Derrett, "Bhū-Bharaṇa, Bhū-Pālana, Bhū-Bhojana...," p. 114.

of that chain was the king as the lord of the earth, its husband.[86]

Above we hinted that the relation between a *kṣatriya*/king and his domain resembles a relation of encompassment. The entity 'kingdom' cannot in fact be separated from the entity 'king', in the same way in which a wife as such cannot be conceived of without her husband. But the relation king/kingdom went beyond the conjugal metaphor. A kingdom as the domain of a king constituted his external powers to act, and these were not separated from his internal ones. In fact kingship started with self mastery. A king's physical appearance, intellectual sharpness, self-control, knowledge, artistic endeavours etc. were as important as the extension of his kingdom and its wealth. What is more, the latter depended on and were a sign of a king's internal constitution.[87] A modern political scientist would be surprised to see that in the *śāstric* and *purāṇic* sections which deal with *rājadharma*, the lists of qualities a king has to possess have little to do with politics in the way we intend it today. In the *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilīya, for instance, among the excellences of a king the following are listed:

> Born in a high family, endowed with good fortune, intelligence and spirit, given to seeing elders, pious, truthful in speech, not breaking his promise, grateful, liberal, of great energy, not dilatory, with weak neighbouring princes, resolute, not having a mean council (of ministers), desirous of training....[88]

These characteristics are called *ābhigāmika guṇas*, that is, qualities which make a king 'attractive', 'resorted to' and approached by others. Significantly it is these kind of qualities which in inscriptions constituted a king as 'refuge' (*āśraya*) for other rulers and people alike. On the other hand, these same *guṇas* entitled a king to a number of privileges, and effectively constituted him as *bhogapati*. In the *Mānasollāsa*, a 12th century text, the major part of the third *viṃśati* is taken up by the discussion on the

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[86] Indeed the argument is more complex. In fact at the head of this chain of lords, which was also a chain of beings, was certainly the king as the lord of the earth. However in the early medieval Indian context, he was not the highest lord of all. Above him Viṣṇu and Śiva were lords of the entire cosmos. The relationship between these gods and the king was of analogy, continuity and encompassment. For reasons of space I do not intend entering this argument here, though I am aware of its relevance for the topic at study. See R. Inden, "The Ceremony of the Great Gift (*Mahādāna*): Structure and Historical Context in Indian Ritual and Society," *Asie du Sud: Traditions et Changements* (1979), pp. 131-36; of the same author see "Hierarchies of Kings in Early Medieval India," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 15.1&2 (Jan.-Dec. 1981), pp. 99-125; Daud Ali, "Royal Eulogy as World History: Rethinking Copper-plate Inscriptions in Cōḷa India," R. Inden ed., *Querying the Medieval: Texts and the History of Practices in South Asia*, (forthcoming), pp. 243-339. While the first two titles set the theoretical argument, the third one applies it to a particular early medieval Indian kingdom.

[87] Inden, "Lordship and Caste in Hindu Discourse," p. 164.

[88] *Arthaśāstra*, 6.1.3.

king's twenty kinds of enjoyments (*upabhogas*). All twenty of them concern the physical person of the king in the context of his court.[89] The psychological and physical well-being of a king was in fact strictly and directly linked to the well-being of his kingdom.[90]

The measure and the closeness of the relation between king and kingdom is also indicated by another belief embedded in the Indian notion of lordship. The king is always considered responsible for the wellbeing of his people and territory. Rightly enough "a good king should strive always to add to the prosperity of his people, bringing about a state of plenty and affluence."[91] The fact is that the welfare of a kingdom was not only determined by good policies but also by a king's inherent nature and hence actions. If his actions were good, that is, conforming to *dharma*, then also the result of those actions was good. And goodness here is less a moral quality and more a material attribute.[92] The point is that there was a link between what a king was and did and his kingdom, which in a sense became an extension of himself. If famine, natural calamities, drought, wars etc. took hold of a kingdom, these were attributed to the unworthiness of the king. Specifically, the sovereign was indeed responsible for rainfall. The righteous king in fact secured regular rain by good governance as well as by his sacrifices.[93] Both good governance and sacrifices, particularly the latter, eminently sustained the cosmo-moral order. And this again was part of a king's role as the maintainer of the earth (*bhūbharaṇa*). From the early medieval period onwards, this role became entangled with his divinity, his inner nature being constituted with the particles of great gods, among which Indra the king of gods, and the dispenser of rain

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[89] G.K. Shrigonderkar ed., *Mānasollāsa of King Someśvara*, 2 (Baroda, 1939), p. 2. The *upabhogas* are there listed in the following order: 'enjoyment of palaces' (*gṛhpabhoga*), 'enjoyment of bath' (*snānabhoga*), 'enjoyment of sandals' (*pādukābhoga*), 'enjoyment of betel leaves' (*tāmbūlabhoga*), 'enjoyment of ointments' (*vilepanabhoga*), 'enjoyment of garments' (*vastropabhoga*), 'enjoyment of garlands' (*mālyopabhoga*), 'enjoyment of ornaments' (*bhūṣopabhoga*), 'enjoyment of seats' (*āsanopabhoga*), 'enjoyment of fly-whisk' (*cāmarabhoga*), 'enjoyment of holding the darbar' (*āsthānabhoga*), 'enjoyment of children' (*putrabhoga*), 'enjoyment of food' (*annabhoga*), 'enjoyment of drinking water' (*pānīyabhoga*), 'enjoyment of smearing the feet with unguents' (*pādābhyaṅgopabhoga*), 'enjoyment of vehicles' (*yānopabhoga*), 'enjoyment of umbrellas' (*chatrabhoga*), 'enjoyment of beds' (*śayyābhoga*), 'enjoyment of incense' (*dhūpabhoga*), and finally 'enjoyment of women' (*yoṣidubhoga*).

[90] A physically disabled king was thus a bad omen for the whole kingdom. See *Arthaśāstra*, 8.2.19-25.

[91] Gonda, "Ancient Indian Kingship from a Religious Point of View," part I, p. 42.

[92] Inden, "Lordship and Caste in Hindu Discourse," p. 163.

[93] Derrett, "Bhū-Bharaṇa, Bhū-Pālana, Bhū-Bhojana...," p. 111. Literary references for this point may be found there, and in Gonda, "Ancient Indian Kingship from a Religious Point of View," part I, p. 42.

himself.[94]

The argument could be continued at length. However, the foregoing discussion should be enough to show that in early medieval India, the notion of a state as a separate institution (from society) did not exist. A kingdom, in fact, was the social system with the king at its centre. The *saptāṅga* (i.e. seven limbs) theory of the state which will be outlined in the following chapter, further supports this interpretation. In this theory, the kingdom is represented as a body whose head/soul, the most important of the limbs, is the king. Kingship therefore constituted a kingdom and *dharma* its *raison d'ètre*.[95] The 'state' was the order of society which, ideologically, was not created by the king or the people, but which instead they existed to secure.[96] It remains to be seen how these ideas found practical expression in both the Pāla and Gupta social formations.

4. Lordship in Pāla and Gupta polities

Despite the four centuries separating the inception of the two dynasties the ideological construct emerging from inscriptional evidence remains remarkably similar for both. The *varṇa* template in particular and the notion of *dharma* in general appear to have played a structuring role in both the Pāla and Gupta social formations. The dominance of this ideology was nothing but the effect of economic relations of production for which *varṇa* and *dharma* provided a meaningful framework. Furthermore, the same relations of production, informed by that ideological construct, were *ipso facto* and by default political relations as well. The state as a separate domain and institution did not exist but was itself the totality of social relations. What we see in early medieval India is

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[94] See *Manu*, IX.304. In this context suffice it to say that the divinity of kings cannot be interpreted in the manner of Christian theology. Indian gods are radically 'immanent' beings which enter the space of the natural. Secondly, the theory of the king as constituted by the particles of gods (*lokapālas*) would require a separate treatment by itself. In the early medieval period the divine particles are usually derived from 8 gods (other numbers are also known though), the *lokapālas* or guardians of the 8 directions. Each god's particle represented a royal function, so that the functions of a ruler appeared to coincide with divine powers. See references in Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, pp. 23-25; Gonda, "Ancient Indian Kingship from a Religious Point of View," part I, pp. 59-68. This theory is strictly linked to the idea of lordship as embodied by the gods (particular ones) and of which that of a king is in a relation of analogy, continuity and parallelism. The genealogical link between a king and a god (usually Viṣṇu or Śiva), as it is often found in inscriptions, belongs to the same early medieval discourse. See footnote 86 above.

[95] The complex identity of king and kingdom is dismissed by Chattopadhyaya ("'Autonomous Spaces' and the Authority of the State...," p. 12) on the basis of the *aṅgas* theory of the state which sees the king as one of the constituents and not the only constituent of the state. He however confuses the description of a state with its definition; see Prakash, *Political Ideas in the Purāṇas*, p. 63.

[96] Gonda, "Ancient Indian Kingship from a Religious Point of View," part IV, p. 159.

a complex network of relations which linked the cosmos with the life of individual people on the basis of an ideological template. Clearly enough such a template was the condition of existence of social relations, but was itself non-existent without those same relations.

The starting point for both the Pāla and Gupta social formations is that their kingdoms ideally embraced the whole of the earth. Of Gopāla I it is said that "he conquered the earth as far as the sea;"[97] similarly for Samudragupta he is styled as the conqueror of the whole world.[98] It is in fact inconceivable for a *mahārājādhirāja*, the title used by both dynasties, to rule over something less than the whole earth.[99] This depends once again on the same concept of encompassing lordship discussed above and the 'political geography' it articulated. In homology with and encompassed by the cosmic overlord, a *mahārājādhirāja* was by necessity the king of the entire earth.[100] The chain of lordship constituting the universe had to be represented also as a chain of being, and hence in spatial homology with the cosmic domain of great gods. This last consideration implies that the early medieval Indian kingdom, was not confined to territorial boundaries alone! Devapāla, thus, "ruled the earth free from rivals"[101] and Samudragupta "had no antagonist in the world."[102] That *dharma* both as cosmo-moral order and as *varṇadharma*, played a fundamental role in the way Pāla and Gupta rulers conceived themselves and their respective kingdoms is highlighted once again when Dharmapāla is said to be "conversant with the precepts of the *śāstras*"[103] and Samudragupta is said to have his fame enhanced "by the study of the precepts of the scriptures (*śāstravāky*)."[104] This knowledge is not however an end to itself but is functional to political praxis. Thus Dharmapāla managed "[to restrain] those who swerved from the right course,"[105] and in Skandagupta's time "no man among his

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[97] Kielhorn, "The Mungir Copper-plate Grant of Devapaladeva," *IA* XXI, p. 257, lines 5-6.
[98] Fleet, "Allahabad Posthumous Stone Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta," *CII* III (1888), p. 10, line 29.
[99] In *purāṇic* geography the whole earth is called Jambudvīpa and Bhāratavarṣa represents in it the Indian subcontinent. While Jambudvīpa is the realm of the cosmic overlord (either Śiva or Viṣṇu), Bhāratavarṣa is the realm of the earthly overlord. The two kingdoms are built both in homology and encompassment so that Bhāratavarṣa represents Jambudvīpa. These ideas can also be traced in our inscriptions. See Inden, "Hierarchies of Kings in Early Medieval India," pp. 99-125; Ali, "Royal Eulogy as World History: Rethinking Copper-plate Inscriptions in Cōḷa India," pp. 303-7.
[100] For the 'political geography', see the previous footnote. For the notion of cosmic overlord see footnote 86 above.
[101] Kielhorn, "The Mungir Copper-plate Grant of Devapaladeva," *IA* XXI, p. 258, lines 23-24.
[102] Fleet, "Allahabad Posthumous Stone Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta," *CII* III (1888), p. 14, line 24.
[103] Kielhorn, "The Mungir Copper-plate Grant of Devapaladeva," *IA* XXI, p. 257, line 8.
[104] Fleet, "Allahabad Posthumous Stone Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta," *CII* III (1888), p. 16, line 30.
[105] Kielhorn, "The Mungir Copper-plate Grant of Devapaladeva," *IA* XXI, p. 257, line 8.

subjects [fell] away from *dharma*."[106] In their respective contexts, the two expressions refer exactly to the same thing, i.e. *varṇāśramadharma*. It is this which constituted the horizon of governance in both Pāla and Gupta polities so much so that Nārāyaṇapāla "adorned by his own deeds the throne of law (*dharmma-āsanam*) obtained by righteousness,"[107] and Samudragupta was considered "the building of the pale of *dharma*."[108] Here *dharma* is indeed depicted as the only sovereign principle. To do good is to be *dharmic* and to do wrong is to be *adharmic*. The first kind of actions supports the cosmo-moral order while the second destroys it. It is worth noting that Nārāyaṇapāla adorned the throne of *dharma* through his good (i.e. *dharmic*) deeds; but he himself obtained that same throne because of righteousness. In other words, the relationship between the king and *dharma* is not external but internal, a king is such because that is his *dharma*! Thus *dharma* is not an external code of laws, either positive or natural but the 'infrastructure' of a social system which necessarily requires a king for its own existence. In the case of Samudragupta he was indeed considered nearly an incarnation of *dharma* himself.

Among the good deeds which enhanced the fame of rulers, and hence supported *dharma*, we find that Dharmapāla, for instance, after having conquered the world, "released the princes"[109] he had captured. Samudragupta, on the other hand, increased his glory by "capturing and then liberating"[110] former enemies. In the same way he was renown for "establishing (again) many royal families"[111] and "restoring the wealth of the various kings who had been conquered by the strength of his arm."[112] Obviously these are references to kings and families already subdued. In fact the fame which rulers obtained with these practices was necessarily related to their martial qualities and their prowess on the battle fields. Fame, the most valued asset for a *kṣatriya*, was as much the result of slaying enemies as the result of giving freedom to subdued rulers. Lordliness consisted in fact in conceding what one had the power of taking away. Political subjection was then cast as an act of human devotion and grace, and hence fame enhancing![113] This praxis of reinstalling subdued rulers was probably more

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[106] J.F. Fleet, "Junagadh Rock Inscription of Skandagupta. The Years 136, 137 and 138," *CII* III (1888), p. 62, line 5.
[107] Banerji, "The Bangarh Grant of Mahi-Pala I: the 9th Year," *EI* XIV, p. 329, verse 6.
[108] Fleet, "Allahabad Posthumous Stone Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta," *CII* III (1888), p. 12, line 15.
[109] Kielhorn, "The Mungir Copper-plate Grant of Devapaladeva," *IA* XXI, p. 257, lines 12-13.
[110] Fleet, "Allahabad Posthumous Stone Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta," *CII* III (1888), p. 12, line 19.
[111] *Ibid.*, p. 14, line 23.
[112] *Ibid.*, p. 14, line 26.
[113] Daud Ali, personal communication.

effective and politically more rewarding than establishing power from the conquering king's own court. The defeated ruler could regain his freedom by recognising the overlordship of his victor which very likely also entailed paying certain tribute. Dharmapāla, in this respect, was described as "the only refuge of kings that had sought protection (*pālana*) out of fear."[114] And in a similar way Samudragupta was depicted as the king "whose protection, other people, afflicted by his prowess, sought."[115]

From the way these kings are depicted in their respective sources, it seems that they were conceived of as embodiments of pure authority. In a meaningful way they were indeed embodiments of *dharma*.[116] To be recognised as overlord was possibly their greatest aspiration. That recognition itself implied the recognition of the cosmo-moral order of which they were the bearers. According to this ideology, such authority, however, was not the result of imperial conquest, but viceversa. In our inscriptions great evidence is accorded not only to military exploits but also to the personal characteristics of single rulers. The latter in fact were not distinct from the former, but were their foundation. Leaving aside the attributes related to the rulers' military expertise with which inscriptions are replete, we find that Gopāla I is singled out for his "compassion"[117] and his being a "well-conducted"[118] king. Similarly, Samudragupta is said to be "full of compassion" and "with a tender heart."[119] Skandagupta is described as being "of spotless soul" and "renowned for the innate power of (his) mighty intellect,"[120] and Devapāla is instead reputed for his "unsullied thought" and "control of speech."[121] However the king who receives the greatest number of appellations is no doubt Samudragupta. His poetic and musical achievements are praised for the fame they spread and he himself is called *kavirāja*, the king of poets.[122] From Pāla inscriptions we do not get any reference of the artistic and particularly poetic

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[114] Banerji, "The Bangarh Grant of Mahi-Pala I: the 9th Year," *EI* XIV, p. 329, verse 2, lines 7-8.
[115] Fleet, "Allahabad Posthumous Stone Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta," *CII* III (1888), p. 12, lines 9-10.
[116] It is worth noting that Jayapāla, the general of king Devapāla, is said to have vanquished the enemies of *dharma* in battle, and in so doing he built a kingdom for his cousin Devapāla; see Banerji, "The Bangarh Grant of Mahi-Pala I: the 9th Year," *EI* XIV, p. 329, verse 4, lines 10-12. To fight was indeed to fight for *dharma* against *adharma*.
[117] *Ibid.*, p. 328, verse 1, line 1.
[118] Kielhorn, "The Mungir Copper-plate Grant of Devapaladeva," *IA* XXI, p. 257, line 5.
[119] Fleet, "Allahabad Posthumous Stone Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta," *CII* III (1888), p. 14, line 23.
[120] J.F. Fleet, "Bhitari Stone Pillar Inscription of Skandagupta," *CII* III (1888), p. 55, lines 6-7.
[121] Kielhorn, "The Mungir Copper-plate Grant of Devapaladeva," *IA* XXI, p. 258, line 18.
[122] Fleet, "Allahabad Posthumous Stone Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta," *CII* III (1888), p. 15, line 27. Other attributes praising his intellectual and artistic prowess can be found on p. 11, line 6; p. 12, lines 15-16.

achievements of these kings. It is known however that Vidyākara's *Subhāṣitaratnakoṣa* lists a few verses attributed to some of the Pāla kings.[123]

Whatever the case, it is apparent that kings' personal qualities were relevant and added to the notion of kingship in early medieval polities. They constituted in fact the inner characteristic on which the *kṣatriya*'s power resided. They were so meaningful that Vigrahapāla II "was pleasing to the eyes on account of [his] personal beauty;"[124] or that Samudragupta had "a most charming body."[125] Both physical and intellectual attributes were expressive of a king's ontological reality, of which the entity 'kingdom' was an extension. In inscriptions however the ontological relation which linked a king and his kingdom is not immediately apparent. The lapse might be ascribed to the literary genre of these compositions. In fact in the *Rāmacarita* in the section praising Varendra, the fatherland of the Pālas, the following verse makes up for the silence of inscriptions:

> Then this country (Varendrī) with the flow of water coming from large clouds and with its prosperity derived from the strict adherence to the command of the king, attained a great glory and maintained the internal order among its people.[126]

Here three essential elements of the early medieval Indian notion of lordship are combined together. Rain, prosperity and great glory, and the preservation of the order among people become the consequences of the reestablishment of Pāla rule in Varendra after the parenthesis of the Kaivarta rebellion. Prosperity is the result of the protection, sustenance and maintenance afforded by Rāmapāla after he recovered what was his by *dharmic* necessity.

The language of protection and maintenance is widely used in our inscriptions too. Gopāla I, for instance, is called "master of the earth" (*vasundhara pati*);[127] Dharmapāla is recognised as "capable of bearing the weight of the earth" (*bhū-bhṛtām* and *kṣmā-bharāṃ*);[128] Gopāla II instead is said to be "the only master of the earth" (*avaner eka patnyā*);[129] and Mahīpāla I, among others, is termed "protector of the

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[123] Daniel H.H. Ingalls tr., *An Anthology of Sanskrit Court Poetry: Vidyākara's Subhāṣitaratnakoṣa* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1965). For instance, the verses no. 64 and 877 on page 81 and 267 respectively, are attributed to king Dharmapāla.
[124] Banerji, "The Bangarh Grant of Mahi-Pala I: the 9th Year," *EI* XIV, p. 329, verse 1, lines 20-21.
[125] Fleet, "Allahabad Posthumous Stone Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta," *CII* III (1888), p. 12, line 17.
[126] *Rāmacarita*, IV.4B.
[127] Kielhorn, "The Mungir Copper-plate Grant of Devapaladeva," *IA* XXI, p. 257, lines 4-5.
[128] Banerji, "The Bangarh Grant of Mahi-Pala I: the 9th Year," *EI* XIV, p. 329, verse 2, line 7.
[129] *Ibid.*, p. 329, verse 9, line 18.

earth" (*avani-pālaḥ*).[130] Similarly on the Gupta side, Skandagupta is called "master of the world" (*pṛthivī-pati*).[131] It is remarkable however that in the early Gupta period, we do not get many examples of these linguistic conventions. Several reasons may explain this. It is undoubted, however, that the Guptas too referred to themselves as rulers, and interpreted their role with the same kind of categories. A single example will hopefully bear this out. In the Junāgaḍh inscription of Skandagupta, the latter appoints Parṇadatta as ruler of the Surāṣṭrās' countries. To rule here is termed "to bear the burden" (*bharaṇa*)[132] and "to protect" (*Surāṣṭr-āvani-pālanāya*).[133] The term 'protectors' (*goptṛ*)[134] is also employed to indicate other rulers. To protect, bear, sustain and foster are actions which find their best context in the conjugal metaphor. These are in fact some of the actions which characterise the relation of a husband towards his wife. It is indeed this metaphor which interprets lordship in our inscriptions. Gopāla I is then said to be the husband (*pati*) of Fortune and the husband of the earth, the two being co-wife (*sapatnyā*)[135] to each other. Similarly Gopāla II is considered to be the only husband (*pati*) of the earth and Lakṣmī the co-wife of the earth herself.[136] Dharmapāla himself is portrayed in the same relationship as the husband of both Lakṣmī and the earth.[137] The king thus in early medieval sources is often depicted as a husband with two wives. The image is highly meaningful. The earth as wife becomes the hypostatisation of a king's external domain, his power to act. As such the earth is not separated from her husband/king but is encompassed by him, as the whole encompasses its parts.[138] Similarly, Lakṣmī may represent a king's internal domain, the preconditions for his power to act in his external realm. In a way Lakṣmī comes to represent the king's nature, his inner characteristics, as the nature and characteristics of a *kṣatriya*. In this sense she is often represented as the goddess of royalty. Furthermore, to the extent that the kingdom can be construed as the physical extension of the king's body, *Lakṣmī* and *Pṛthivī* can also be seen as the hypostatisations of attributes of lordship. Significantly,

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[130] *Ibid.*, p. 330, verse 12, line 24. The titles mentioned above are only examples which could be easily multiplied. In other inscriptions they are applied to other Pāla rulers. They do not in fact distinguish one ruler from the other but are basically used as synonyms for *rāja*.

[131] Fleet, "Bhitari Stone Pillar Inscription of Skandagupta," *CII* III (1888), p. 53, lines 7.

[132] Fleet, "Junagadh Rock Inscription of Skandagupta. The Years 136, 137 and 138," *CII* III (1888), p. 59, line 8.

[133] *Ibid.*, p. 59, line 9.

[134] *Ibid.*, p. 59, line 6.

[135] Kielhorn, "The Mungir Copper-plate Grant of Devapaladeva," *IA* XXI, p. 257, lines 4-5.

[136] Banerji, "The Bangarh Grant of Mahi-Pala I: the 9th Year," *EI* XIV, p. 329, verses 8-9, lines 17-20.

[137] *Rāmacarita,* I.5B. The conjugal metaphor is very common in Pāla sources. For our purpose it suffices the few cases quoted above.

[138] Inden, "Lordship and Caste in Hindu Discourse," pp. 162-63. The author here expands the argument by adding theological and cosmological considerations.

Lakṣmī is then the "power of valour" (*utsāha*), "counsel" (*mantra*), and "rule" (*prabhu-śakti*, i.e. *koṣa*, *daṇḍa*, and *bala*).[139]

Once again we are called upon to recognise in the configuration of the early medieval Indian notion of lordship, that it is not possible to treat king and kingdom separately. The link between king and kingdom is ontological, the latter being a physical extension of the former. The conjugal metaphor is interesting also from yet another perspective. Often the relationship between a king and the goddess Lakṣmī is construed in parallelism with the relationship between Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī herself. This is the case, for instance, in the Junāgaḍh inscription of Skandagupta:

> Victorious is he, Viṣṇu – the perpetual abode of Lakṣmī, whose dwelling is the waterlily; the conqueror of distress; the completely victorious one, [...] And next, victorious for ever is the supreme king of kings [Skandagupta], whose breast is embraced by the goddess of wealth and splendour [Śrī, i.e. Lakṣmī]...[140]

The same appears to be true for king Mahendrapāla, of whom is said "he was like god Viṣṇu whom goddess Lakṣmī on her own accord chose as her husband."[141] In other cases still, Lakṣmī is portrayed as deserting Viṣṇu for an earthly king. Thus Lakṣmī (Śrī) chooses king (*nṛpati*) Gopāla I as her husband, deserting Hari, a lesser king according to the narrative.[142]

Both the Gupta and Pāla kings tended to base their lordship on the model of the universal lordship exercised over the cosmos by the great gods Viṣṇu or Śiva. The difference between the two types of lordship was again a matter of degree rather than of kind: the cosmic overlord was different from the earthly one for the extension of his domain. The domain of the latter was in fact hierarchically encompassed by the domain of the cosmic overlord in as much the same way as the domain of a *vaiśya* was itself hierarchically encompassed by the domain of a *kṣatriya*/king. The similarity and difference between the two kinds of overlords did not only concern the realms of their respective domains, but invested also the physical person of the kings themselves. In

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[139] Banerji, "The Bangarh Grant of Mahi-Pala I: the 9th Year," *EI* XIV, p. 329, verse 9, lines 19-20. See also footnote 2, on the same page.
[140] Fleet, "Junagadh Rock Inscription of Skandagupta. The Years 136, 137 and 138," *CII* III (1888), p. 61-62, lines 1-2.
[141] Ramesh and Iyer, "Māldā District Museum Copper-plate Charter of Mahendrapāladeva," Year 7," *EI* XLII, p. 25, verse 12, lines 18-19. Exactly the same image is used of Skandagupta; see Fleet, "Junagadh Rock Inscription of Skandagupta. The Years 136, 137 and 138," *CII* III (1888), p. 63, lines 4-5.
[142] Ramesh and Iyer, "Māldā District Museum Copper-plate Charter of Mahendrapāladeva," Year 7," *EI* XLII, p. 25, verse 2, lines 5-6.

both Pāla and Gupta records there is a tendency to assimilate the king to the gods. Thus Samudragupta was "equal to Dhanada and Varuṇa and Indra and Antaka,"[143] and "was a mortal only in celebrating the rites of the observances of mankind, (but was otherwise) a god, dwelling on earth."[144] On the contrary, the Pāla kings, in their inscriptions, were not so explicit. The *Rāmacarita* however makes up for the lapse. There, Rāmapāla is successively compared to Brahmā, Hara (Śiva) and Hari (Viṣṇu) and those gods' qualities are attributed to him.[145] In some Pāla inscriptions we find another kind of reference. This points to the relationship between the king and the guardians of the directions (*lokapālas*). Nārāyaṇapāla is thus said to have possessed in his body "the qualities divided by the guardians of the cardinal points (*dik-pālaiḥ*) for supporting the world."[146]

All these references to some kind of royal divinity reinforce the argument according to which the king's office was not an office at all. To be king, in Pāla and Gupta polities, meant to sustain an order which was inherent and internal to the king but to which he was also subjected. *Dharma* regulated a hierarchical chain of lords with the gods at the top and the *chaṇḍālas* at the bottom. Such an order we may call 'state', being well aware that it was not a social institute among others but the only institute which for its subsistence necessitated a king. *Dharma* as a cosmo-moral order was indeed superior to the king, but without him *dharma* could not be effected.[147] To further highlight the point and to conclude our argument, we may recall a brief passage from the *Rāmacarita*:

> He (Rāmapāla), never feeling too exultant and offering adequate protection repelled the unholy or unfortunate civil revolution; and holding up the rod (of punishment) he went round the earth and put the world on the path trodden by the righteous.[148]

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[143] Fleet, "Allahabad Posthumous Stone Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta," *CII* III (1888), p. 14, line 26.
[144] *Ibid.*, p. 15, line 28.
[145] *Rāmacarita*, I.17AB-19AB. In the last verse Rāmapāla is called "a veritable incarnation of Hari."
[146] Banerji, "The Bangarh Grant of Mahi-Pala I: the 9th Year," *EI* XIV, p. 329, verse 6, lines 13-14. The *Rāmacarita* lists eight gods, identified as *lokapālas*, the particles of which make up the body of a king. The gods are: Indra, Agni, Yama, the Moon, Varuṇa, Dhanada, Kubera and the Sun; see *Rāmacarita*, I.16AB. Notably, three of these gods appear also in the list of gods to whom Samudragupta is reckoned equal.
[147] The *purāṇic* discourse centring on the 'Kali age' sees in fact the decadence of *dharma*, often symbolised by the fall of caste distinctions and by *śūdras* becoming kings, as its distinctive mark. Significantly, some Pāla kings see their royal tenure as the beginning of a new age where *dharma* reigns once again and where the strictures of the *Kali* age are put to an end. See Kielhorn, "The Mungir Copper-plate Grant of Devapaladeva," *IA* XXI, p. 258, lines 21-22.
[148] *Rāmacarita*, I.24B.

The context of course is the Kaivarta rebellion which is here rendered with 'civil revolution'. The expression unsatisfactorily translates the Sanskrit *dharma-viplava*, a 'rebellion against *dharma*'! Such a rebellion is termed 'unholy' (*anīkaṃ*). The term however is equated by the old commentator to *alakṣmīkaṃ*, 'not leading to prosperity'. What has been interpreted by many historians as a revolution, possibly a peasant one,[149] had indeed been interpreted by the court poet as a rebellion against *dharma*, something which could not lead to prosperity. Similarly, the recovery of Varendra by Rāmapāla did not correspond to the reestablishment of the Pāla state, but it consisted of the re-installation of *dharma*, which prosperity and rain, linked to the power of a lawful king, clearly manifested.

At the end of this quasi-synoptical review, it is clear that in both the Pāla and Gupta social formations the same kind of ideology informed and sustained social relations (economic, religious and political). This statement, of course, does not exclude variations and shifts. What I have highlighted here is the basic similarity in the conception of lordship in both Pāla and Gupta sources. The same ideas and motives were however present in each polity with different bearings. For instance, in early Gupta inscriptions the sections dealing with the poetic and artistic achievements of emperors are hugely expanded if compared to the correspondent sections of Pāla inscriptions. The same is to be said of the role of land/earth in the articulation of lordship, the titles of kings and the conjugal metaphor linked to it. In early Gupta records these are scarcely present! These 'anomalies' might be explained by the literary genres employed in the different kind of inscriptions. But they could also be explained by different historical processes.[150] Whatever the case, it is apparent that the Gupta polity worked as a template for successive early medieval North Indian social formations. In a meaningful way it constituted the formative stage of their social organisation. The latter was characterised by a system of 'economic' domination structured on the *varṇa* template. Both dominant rulers and dominated peasantry

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[149] See R.S. Sharma, "Problems of Peasant Protest in Early Medieval India," *Social Scientist* 16.9 (Sept. 1988), pp. 3-16; Rangan Kanti Jana, "The Kaivartta Revolt – A Peasant Uprising in the Pala Age," *Journal of Ancient Indian History* XIX.1-2 (1989-90), pp. 179-95.

[150] The enquiry into this possibility goes beyond the restricted purposes of this dissertation. In this context I may only point out a possible line of research. This should pursue the divide between a Buddhist kind of polity and a Hindu theistic one. It is not unlikely, in fact, that the Guptas maintained and incorporated in their social organisation elements originally belonging to the Buddhist tradition. See Daud Ali, "Technologies of the Self: Courtly Artifice and Monastic Discipline in Early India," *JESHO* 41.2 (1998), pp. 159-84. The distinction made by M.D. Willis between Vedic rituals and temple patronage in the 'religious' practices of early Gupta monarchs may be explicative of both a change from and continuation of an earlier Buddhist political praxis: M.D. Willis, "Patronage during the Gupta Period: Epigraphic Evidence for the Activities of the Gupta Monarchs," *South Asian Archaeology* (1995), pp. 613-23.

partook of it so that consensus was not less important than coercion in the actual functioning of the system. Without the consensus of the dominated it is doubtful that domination could have taken place at all. This was possible because domination was disguised in the form of service. The protection a lord afforded to his people and land was what the dominated exchanged for his labour.[151]

[151] The constant stress laid on the kingly duty of protection in *darmaśāstric* and *purāṇic* literature may be interpreted as the successful attempt to publicise such an idea. After all we do not have to forget that this literature is often the product of *brāhmaṇas*, the ideological heads of the social system.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Political Organisation of Early Medieval North-eastern India

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I have argued that in both the Gupta and Pāla polities the king and his kingdom were not ultimately separable from each other. The state as such, I suggested, did not exist as a separate and secular institution within the social formations of the time but was itself 'the total system of social relations' organised around a cosmological and theological framework. It was in fact because of *dharma* that a king was a king; but it was also because of the king that *dharma* could itself exist as the cosmo-moral order. From here it followed that just as it was *varṇadharma* which articulated the notion of lordship in early medieval India, so the notion of lordship also articulated the *varṇa* template. The agrarian relations of production were then seen as both the practical translation and the heart of such a system. The hierarchical chain of landlords, landowners and peasantry was the cause and the effect of 'a state system' which we may well call kingdom.

In this chapter, the political organisation of the early medieval kingdom as it developed in both the Pāla and Gupta polities will be explored. It has to be clear however that political organisation was but one aspect of these kingdoms. Relations of production, ideological framework and political organisation were in a meaningful way *the* kingdom. This one aspect could not exist without the others. As I have stated throughout this dissertation, aspects are not treated in a compartmentalised way since they were all functions of the one and same historical reality. The political organisation which I will explore then is nothing but the relations of production and their ideological framework seen this time from a different perspective.

A description of both the Pāla and Gupta political organisations will be followed by a comparative analysis of both polities. The concept of 'administration' in particular will be reworked to explain the data reviewed. The role and place of land grants and intermediate authorities will be also explained. It is my intention in this chapter to further conceptualize the early medieval North Indian kingdom as an integrated system of social relations, headed by the king, the supreme landlord, and the source of all conceivable forms of legitimacy, political or otherwise.

2. The structure of the Pāla polity

In the Pāla royal charters the procedure followed in the granting of land is simple and straightforward. The emperor, by his own authority, orders the transfer of land and uses a *dūtaka*, an 'officer' in charge of the execution of the grant, to inform 'his people' (*rājapuruṣas*), leading men and villagers at large. Apparently, no other office seems to be involved in these transactions. However, several of the fifteen Pāla inscriptions, present a somewhat different scenario. Though the emperor appears in all cases as the authority issuing the charters, in six plates the Pālas grant land at the request of others. In the Khalimpur plate, Dharmapāla is asked to grant four villages to a temple built by the petitioner, the *mahāsāmantādhipati* Nārāyaṇavarman. A similar situation is found in the Nālandā plate of Devapāla. Here the king of Suvarṇṇadvīpa, Bālaputradeva of the Śailendra dynasty, requests the emperor through a messenger to grant five villages to a monastery he had built in Nālandā. Other members of the royal family too appear to have petitioned the emperor. In the Mirzapur plate of Śūrapāla, the queen mother Mahāṭadevī requests that four villages be granted to a temple and its community of *brāhmaṇas* in Varāṇasī. In the Manahali copperplate of Madanapāla it is the queen herself, the Paṭṭamahādevī Citramatikā, who requests Śūrapāla to give a *brāhamaṇa* one village as *dakṣiṇā* for reciting the *Mahābhārata* to her. Much more important however for our purpose are two inscriptions of Rājyapāla and Vigrahapāla III. The former is recorded on a stone slab, and records the donation of a village by Rājyapāla in favour of a Śaiva complex. The real donor of the village, in fact, is Yaśodāsa, the king's *tantrādhikārin*. In order to make this grant, Yaśodāsa had to pay the king a fixed *nikara* of 100 *purāṇas* annually.[1] Similarly in the Bangāon plate of Vigrahapāla III, the real donor of parts of a village is not the king but one of his *brāhmaṇa* officers, the *vidheya* Ghaṇṭīśa, who gives away land from his personal *hala*. This land is reported to yield 500 standard coins per year.[2]

From these six inscriptions it emerges clearly that the Pāla kings had a strong political hold on the land within their kingdom. It is clearly stated that the *tantrādhikārin* Yaśodāsa had to pay the treasury 100 *purāṇas* annually to have his donation validated, and it is reasonable to think that Ghaṇṭīśa too had to pay something in order to accomplish his deed. Very likely, Yaśodāsa (and perhaps also Ghaṇṭīśa)

[1] D.C. Sircar, "Bhaturiya Inscription of Rajyapala," *Epigraphia Indica* (*EI*) XXXIII (1959-60), pp. 152-53.
[2] D.C. Sircar, "Bangaon Plate of Vigrahapala III; Regnal Year 17," *EI* XXIX (1951-52), pp. 50-51.

granted a land-generating-revenue to *brāhmaṇas* and he himself had to make up for the loss of revenue that the king incurred, by paying him 100 *purāṇas* annually. In this particular case, Yaśodāsa would probably maintain ownership rights on the donated estate. It is remarkable, then, that Ghaṇṭīśa had to approach the imperial authority to donate his own land. Moreover, it is interesting to note that none of the high ranking petitioners in these six inscriptions, not even the members of the royal family or the *mahāsāmantādhipati* Nārāyaṇavarman, had the authority to issue land grants independently from the reigning monarch.

We have already indicated above that in all the Pāla charters the transfer of land to the various donees was carried out without involving intermediate or lower tiers of the Pāla political organisation. Only one 'officer' in each charter was directly involved in the process: the *dūtaka.* This was an *ad hoc* 'agent' who, judging from the available evidence, was specifically appointed to execute the royal grant. Among the *dūtakas* of the Pāla grants we find three members of the royal family: two *yuvarājas*, sons of the emperors Dharmapāla[3] and Devapāla[4] respectively, and Śūrapāla, brother of Mahendrapāla[5] and a future emperor. Of particular interest is the *dūtaka* of the Nālandā plate of Devapāla: the *maṇḍalādhipati* of Vyāghrataṭī Balavarman.[6] As we mentioned earlier, five villages, all situated in Śrīnagara *bhukti,* were given through this grant to a monastery in Nālandā. Balavarman, being the 'officer' in charge of a *maṇḍala*, may have represented the 'local administrative authority' in charge of the above mentioned five villages. However, Vyāghrataṭī *maṇḍala* was not a subdivision of the Śrīnagara *bhukti* but of Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti.*[7] This suggests that the *dūtaka* had no particular entitlement or jurisdiction in the granting of land, but was merely appointed by the king as an emissary; administrative considerations do not seem to have played any role here. To say that the *dūtaka* fulfilled his royal assignment without any reference to administrative considerations, means that he was not a bureaucrat, and did not act as the 'local' mediator of the central authority of the state. Balavarman, the head of Vyāghrataṭī *maṇḍala*, was the ruler of Vyāghrataṭī and not his

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[3] F. Kielhorn, "Khalimpur Plate of Dharmapaladeva," *EI* IV (1896-97), p. 250, line 49. The *yuvarāja* is here Tribhuvanapāla.

[4] F. Kielhorn, "The Mungir Copper-plate Grant of Devapaladeva," *The Indian Antiquary* (*IA*) XXI (Sept. 1892), p. 257, lines 51-52. The *yuvarāja* is here Rājyapāla.

[5] K.V. Ramesh and S.S. Iyer, "Māldā District Museum Copper-plate Charter of Mahendrapāladeva, Year 7," *EI* XLII (1977-78), pp. 21; 22, lines 39; 54. In this grant there are two *dūtakas*: Śūrapāla and the *mahāsenāpati* Vajradeva.

[6] Hirananda Shastri, "The Nalanda Copper-plate of Devapaladeva," *EI* XVII (1923-24), p. 326, verses 22-23.

[7] Kielhorn, "Khalimpur Plate of Dharmapaladeva," *EI* IV, p. 249, lines 30-31.

administrator. As it will become clearer below, Pāla political organisation did not rely on units of administration but on actual units of lordship. The so called 'officers' were thus rulers and lords, and exercised their authority, because of their local political standing, in conjunction with the king. This will be crucial to the statement that there was no intermediary, bureaucratic class between the king and the peasants. The point can also be inferred if we look at the list of *dūtakas*. Apart from the *dūtakas* already mentioned, we find five *mantrins*,[8] one *mahāsenāpati*,[9] one *sāndhivigrahika*[10] and a certain Trilochana to whom no particular title is given.[11] There is no pattern in how the *dūtaka* was assigned, possibly because it depended on the discretion of the reigning king.

But was there a local administration? The lists of *rājapuruṣas* found in all the Pāla charters offer a fairly consistent and cohesive picture. As it is graphically shown in diagram 3 below, three levels of hierarchically ranked agents can be identified. The first level comprises 'officers' whose names are a derivation or combination of the word *rāja*. Here for example we find the terms *rājarājanaka*, *rājaputra* and *rājāmātya*.[12] According to Morrison "these persons were intimately connected to the person or family of the ruler."[13] Next comes a level of officers whose titles are preceded by the word *mahā*, such as the *mahāsāndhivigrahika, mahākṣapaṭalika, mahāsāmanta, mahāsenāpati, mahāpratīhāra*, etc. Traditionally, these are considered the 'heads of particular departments of the state', directly under the king's authority. Finally, we find a list of officers comprising people in charge of such things as navy, cattle, taxation, police, customs etc. It is at this level where we usually encounter the governor of a division (*rājasthānīyoparika*), the district-head (*viṣayapati*) and the village-head (*grāmapati*).[14] If indeed these lists of officers are hierarchically ordered, they may offer an insight into how the Pāla political structure was organised. The challenge is to pinpoint the exact meaning of terms like *bhukti* and *viṣaya* and interpret them in the

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[8] See respectively E. Hultzsch, "The Bhagalpur Plate of Narayanapala," *IA* XV (Oct. 1886), p. 310, verse 18; R.D. Banerji, "The Bangarh Grant of Mahi-Pala I: The 9th Year," *EI* XIV (1917-18), p. 310, line 61; D.C. Sircar, "Two Plates from Belwa," *EI* XXIX (1951-52), p. 9, line 57; R. D. Banerji, "The Amgachhi Grant of Vigraha-Pala III: The 12th Year," *EI* XV (1919-20), p. 298, lines 48-49; Sircar, "Bangaon Plate of Vigrahapala III; Regnal Year 17," *EI* XXIX, p. 57, line 48.

[9] Ramesh and Iyer, "Māldā District Museum Copper-plate Charter of Mahendrapāladeva, Year 7," *EI* XLII, pp. 21; 22, lines 39; 54.

[10] N.N. Vasu, "The Manahali Copper-plate Inscription of Madanapāladeva," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (*JASB*) LXIX (1900), p. 73, line 54.

[11] Sircar, "Two Plates from Belwa," *EI* XXIX, p. 13, lines 53-54.

[12] See for example Hultzsch, "The Bhagalpur Plate of Narayanapala," *IA* XV, p. 306, lines 30-31.

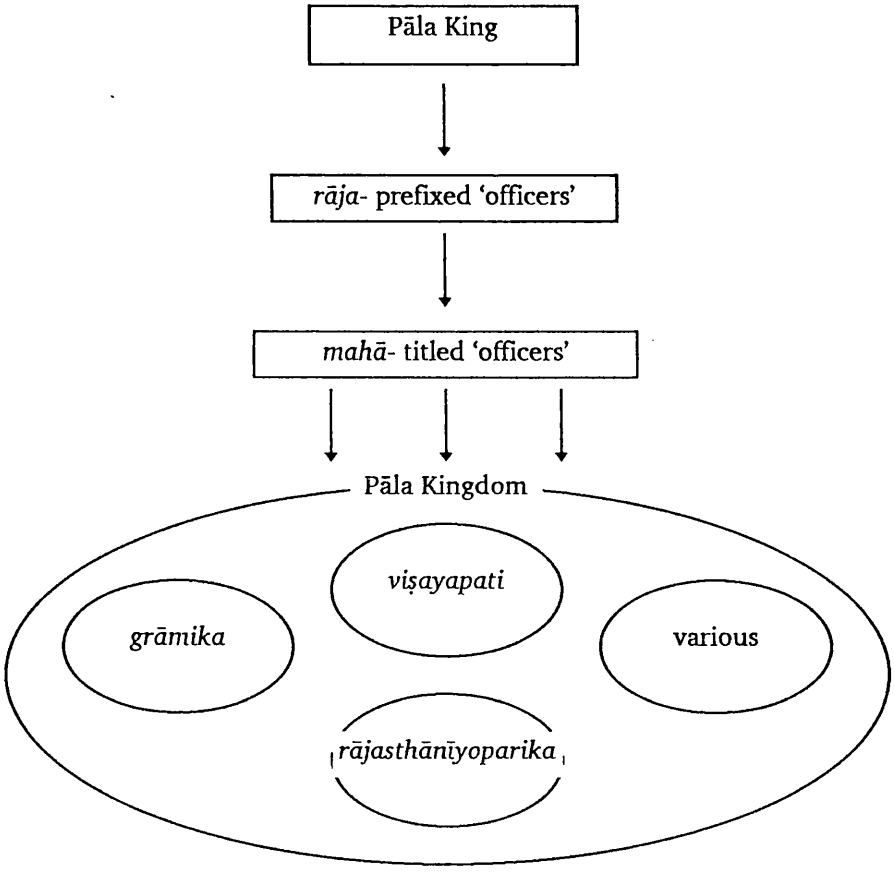
[13] Barrie M. Morrison, *Political Centers and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal* (Tucson, 1970), p. 144.

[14] Hultzsch, "The Bhagalpur Plate of Narayanapala," *IA* XV, p. 306, lines 33-36.

context of titles given to officials who apparently do not have territorial competencies. This question will be explored below.

Diagram 3

Standard Pāla Political Hierarchy Elaborated from the Bhagalpur Grant (late 9th century)

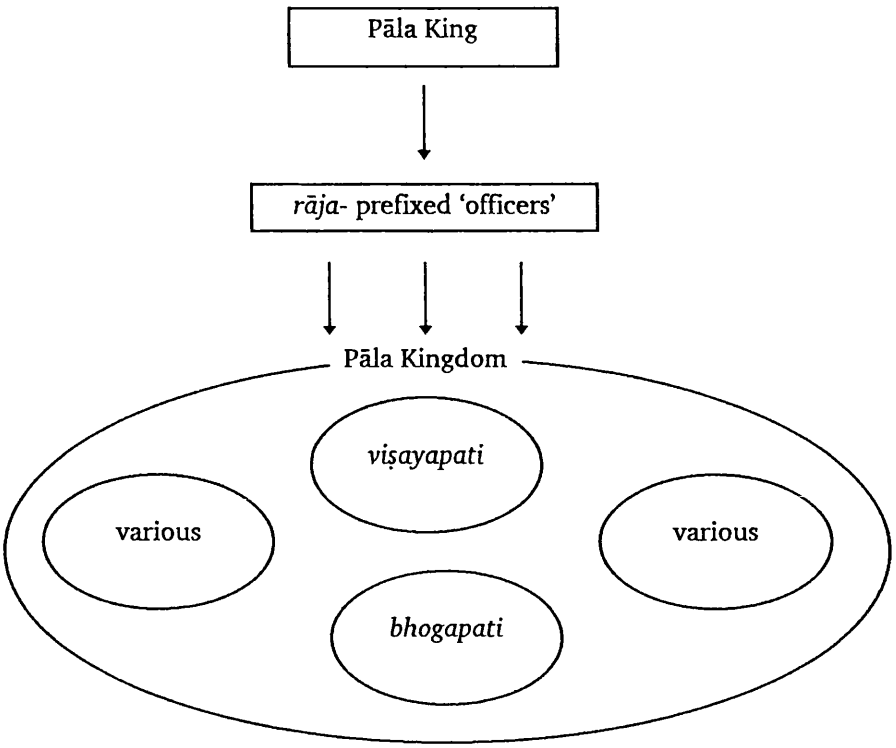


The general picture depicted so far may become clearer if we also look at spatial and temporal developments. While from the time of the Bhagalpur plate of Nārāyaṇapāla (last decade of the 9th century circa) onwards in the lists of officers no appreciable change is notable, in the preceding charters variations may be significant to gain an insight into the historical processes at work. One of the major variations is found in two plates, separated from each other by approximately fifty years and granting land in Puṇḍravardhana: the Khalimpur plate of Dharmapāla (c. 802 AD) and the Malda plate of Mahendrapāla (c. 856 AD). Here both lists of officers leave out all the titles composed with the prefix *mahā,* so that after the customary listing of

rājarājanaka, rājaputra and *rājāmatya*, the lists mention the *senāpati*, the *viṣayapati* and the *bhogapati* etc.[15] Diagram 4 below illustrates this particularity.

Diagram 4

Standard Pāla Political Hierarchy in pre 10th Century Puṇḍravardhana *Bhukti* Elaborated from Dharmapāla's Khalimpur Grant (circa 802 AD)



Approximately contemporary plates which transfer land in Śrīnagara *bhukti*[16] however incorporate lists of officers which resemble the one found in the Bhagalpur plate of Nārāyaṇapāla. From this we may deduce that at least in the first period of Pāla rule in Puṇḍravardhana (that is from Dharmapāla to Śūrapāla I, circa 770-870 AD) the system of political organisation was probably different from the one in place in Śrīnagara *bhukti*. In Bihar, in fact, we find the full fledged list of officers that eventually will prevail even in Bengal from the time of Nārāyaṇapāla onwards. In Puṇḍravardhana

[15] Kielhorn, "Khalimpur Plate of Dharmapaladeva," *EI* IV, p. 249, line 44. The same order is followed in Mahendrapāla's plate except that Dharmapāla's *bhogapati* is here called *bhuktipati*; see Ramesh and Iyer, "Māldā District Museum Copper-plate Charter of Mahendrapāladeva, Year 7," *EI* XLII, p. 21, lines 35-36.

[16] See the following plates: P.N. Bhattacharyya, "Nalanda Plate of Dharmapaladeva," *EI* XXIII (1935-36), pp. 291-92, lines 7-20; Kielhorn, "The Mungir Copper-plate Grant of Devapaladeva," *IA* XXI, p. 256, lines 31-35; Shastri, "The Nalanda Copper-plate of Devapaladeva," *EI* XVII, p. 325, lines 26-39; D.C. Sircar, "Lucknow Museum Copper-plate Inscription of Surapala I, Regnal Year 3," *EI* XL (1973), p. 14, lines 51-55.

instead, it seems that at least up to the time of Mahendrapāla, a sort of organisation founded on *bhuktis* and *viṣayas* was prevalent. This deduction is further strengthened if we consider the fact that at this time Pāla expansion towards Kanauj and beyond was reaching its peak. It is thus conceivable that Śrīnagara *bhukti*, being geographically closer to the territories to the West had a greater political and strategic importance than Puṇḍravardhana. The *mahā* titles would then reflect a stronger hold of the emperor on his domains through officers who were apparently detached from territory-based administrative considerations. That same hold will be eventually developed in Puṇḍravardhana from the time of Nārāyaṇapāla when Pāla ascendency is by then confined to the Northeast. However, this last consideration awaits further corroboration by the definition of the relation between units of territorial 'administration' and the various officers appearing in our inscriptions.

The central area on which the Pāla kings exercised direct and extensive political power consisted of parts of both Bihar and Bengal. Such an area comprised specifically North Bihar (Tīra *bhukti*), Eastern Bihar (Śrīnagara *bhukti*) and North Bengal (Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*). These three major territorial divisions were made up of smaller units: *viṣayas*, *maṇḍalas* and *vīthīs*. Though their exact meaning remains elusive, it is usually accepted that from a geographical point of view, these represented decreasing territorial units of 'administration' which encapsulated each other. Thus in a *bhukti*, there were several *viṣayas*, which in turn contained different *maṇḍalas* made up again of several *vīthīs*. A *vīthī* supposedly consisted of a group of *grāmas* or villages.[17] Such a conceptualisation, however, is problematic. Though it is clear that the terms referred to territorial units, it is not at all certain that they indicated units of administration or encapsulated each other in the way described above. For instance, the Khalimpur copper-plate of Dharmapāla states that the village of Krauñchaśvabhra was located in the Mahantāprakāśa *viṣaya* within the Vyāghrataṭī *maṇḍala*.[18] The relation between *viṣaya* and *maṇḍala* is here reversed! Considering the flexible usage of this terminology, I would suggest that rather than stable territorial units of administration, the *viṣayas*, *maṇḍalas*, *bhuktis* etc. indicated areas of political lordship.

In the previous chapter we have already stated that *viṣaya* and *bhukti* indicated the domains of particular lords, their fields of influence and enjoyment respectively,

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[17] For a discussion on these terms see Ganesh Prasad Sinha, *Post-Gupta Polity: A.D. 500-700* (Calcutta, 1972), pp. 66-84.

[18] Kielhorn, "Khalimpur Plate of Dharmapaladeva," *EI* IV, p. 249, lines 30-31. The editor considers this passage a mistake! See *ibid.*, p. 253, footnote 3.

and characterised a relation of ownership. It is thus possible to think of *viṣayas*, *maṇḍalas*, *bhuktis* etc. as domains-together-with-their-inhabitants under the rule of particular lords. We may thus be dealing here with domains of political influence rather than mere districts and subdivisions.[19] Crucially, the difference between an administrator and a lord is that the former does not own the territory under his jurisdiction while the latter does. As lord, then, one had to provide protection to his territory and people. In this context it may be recalled that Heitzman already attempted an articulation of lordship in the South Indian Cōḷa kingdom. However, his definition of the Cōḷa state as 'proto-bureaucratic'[20] manifests a conceptual inconsistency. Lordship being the basis of the state does not in fact provide for the existence of a bureaucratic machine mediating between the political and the economic domains, the rulers and the ruled.[21]

From Pāla inscriptions we know that in Śrīnagara *bhukti* there were at least six such major domains: Gayā *viṣaya,* with Jambūnadī *vīthī,*[22] Krimilā *viṣaya,*[23] Rajagriha *viṣaya,*[24] Krauñchadhānaka *viṣaya*, Devarāṣṭra *viṣaya* and Kalmaṣanāśapāra *viṣaya.*[25] In the Tīra *bhukti* of North Bihar instead we know of only two *viṣayas*: Kakṣa[26] and Hodreya.[27] Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti* represented possibly the heartland of the Pāla empire. It had at least six major areas of political influence: Vyāghrataṭī *maṇḍala* with Mahantāprakāśa *viṣaya*, Sthālīkkaṭa *viṣaya* with Āmraṣaṇḍikā and Udragrāma *maṇḍalas,*[28] Kundālakhātaka *viṣaya,*[29] Koṭīvarṣa *viṣaya* with Gokalikā,[30] Brāhmaṇīgrāma[31] and Halāvartta *maṇḍalas,*[32] Pañchanagarī *viṣaya*[33] and Phāṇitavīthī

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[19] Significantly the *Rāmacarita* says that in Varendra because of the rebellion "*viṣayas* and *grāmas* are in confusion regarding their ownership:" Haraprasad Sastri ed., *Rāmacaritam of Sandhyākaranandin,* (Calcutta, 1969), I.48B.

[20] James Heitzman, *Gifts of Power: Lordship in an Early Indian State* (Delhi, 1997), p. 148ff.

[21] Daud Ali, review of Heitzman's *Gifts of Power: Lordship in an Early Indian State, The Journal of Asian Studies* 57.4 (November 1998), pp. 1202-4.

[22] Bhattacharyya, "Nalanda Plate of Dharmapaladeva," *EI* XXIII, p. 290. The same information is also given in Shastri, "The Nalanda Copper-plate of Devapaladeva," *EI* XVII, p. 311.

[23] Lionel D. Barnett, "The Mungir Plate of Devapaladeva: Samvat 33," *EI* XVIII (1925-26), p. 306, line 30.

[24] Shastri, "The Nalanda Copper-plate of Devapaladeva," *EI* XVII, p. 311.

[25] These last three *viṣayas* are mentioned in Sircar, "Lucknow Museum Copper-plate Inscription of Surapala I, Regnal Year 3," *EI* XL, p. 14, lines 50-51.

[26] Hultzsch, "The Bhagalpur Plate of Narayanapala," *IA* XV, p. 306, line 29.

[27] Sircar, "Bangaon Plate of Vigrahapala III; Regnal Year 17," in *EI* XXIX, p. 55, line 25.

[28] Kielhorn, "Khalimpur Plate of Dharmapaladeva," *EI* IV, p. 253, lines 30-42.

[29] Ramesh and Iyer, "Māldā District Museum Copper-plate Charter of Mahendrapāladeva, Year 7," *EI* XLII, p. 21, lines 30-31. Also R.C. Majumdar and P.N. Misra, "The Jājilpārā Grant of Gopāla II, year 6," *Journal of the Asiatic Society. Letters (JAS.L)* XVII.2 (1951), p. 139.

[30] Banerji, "The Bangarh Grant of Mahi-Pala I: The 9th Year," *EI* XIV, p. 330.

[31] Banerji, "The Amgachhi Grant of Vigraha-Pala III: The 12th Year," *EI* XV, p. 300.

[32] Vasu, "The Manahali Copper-plate Inscription of Madanapāladeva," *JASB* LXIX, p. 71, line 32.

[33] Sircar, "Two Plates from Belwa," *EI* XXIX, p. 7, lines 28-31. Here two other subdivisions are mentioned: Phāṇita *vīthī* and Puṇḍarikā *maṇḍala*.

viṣaya with Puṇḍarika *maṇḍala*.[34] Supposedly these domains were hierarchically ranked. This hierarchy, however, did not depend on the territorial extension of a lord's political influence but on the direct link and place that any given local lord had with and in the central Pāla court. The enjoyment of the king's *favour* was, in this respect, crucial to the order of ranking. This last remark further qualifies the Pāla political organisation in terms of units of lordship. The logic of administration does not provide for the direct intervention of the lord/king, while lordship, on the contrary, involves a structure of personal affiliation, or what we might more generally call 'patronage'.

A comparison with contemporary usage in other North Indian polities does not make things clearer. In the Barah plate of the Gurjara-Pratīhāra king Bhojadeva (c. 836 AD), the village Valāka is said to be within the Udambara *viṣaya* of the Kālañjara *maṇḍala* in the Kanyakubja *bhukti*.[35] The Rāṣṭrakūṭa king Amoghavarṣa in his Sanjan plates (c. 871 AD) mentions neither *maṇḍalas* nor *bhuktis*. These seem to have been replaced with the term *raṣṭras*.[36] Similarly in the Belava plate of Bhojavarma (11th century AD), *viṣaya* is replaced instead with the term *maṇḍala*.[37] The examples could be multiplied but the few cases mentioned should suffice for our purpose.[38] On the other hand, if indeed we were dealing here with actual administrative units of territorial jurisdiction it would remain unexplained why such units existed in some places and not in others. The village Uttarāma, for instance, is said to be within Jambūnadī *vīthī* but no *maṇḍala* is here mentioned.[39] Similarly the village of Ānandapura which laid in the Kuddālakhāta *viṣaya* is referred to without any reference to a *maṇḍala*.[40]

Viṣayas, *maṇḍalas* and *bhuktis*, together with other territorial units[41] were very likely kinds of principalities under the unifying rule of a central monarch, in our case the Pāla king. At the head of each one of these principalities, a lesser ruler carried out the royal functions. We know for instance that Balavarmman, the *dūtaka* in the Nālandā

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[34] *Ibid.*, line 27, p. 11. Notably, what in the grant of Mahīpāla I was only a *vīthī*, had become, in the Vighahapāla III's grant, a full fledged *viṣaya*. The two grants are separated by a distance of approximately 50 years.

[35] Hirananda Sastri, "Barah Copper-plate of Bhojadeva; Vikrama-Samvat 893," *EI* XIX (1927-28), p. 18, lines 6-7.

[36] D.R. Bhandarkar, "Sanjan Plates of Amoghavarsha I: Saka-Samvat 793," *EI* XVIII (1925-26), p. 249, lines 58-59.

[37] Radhagovinda Basak, "Belava Copper-plate of Bhojavarmadeva. The Fifth Year," *EI* XII (1913-14), p. 40, lines 27-28.

[38] Other examples may be found in D.C. Sircar, *Indian Epigraphy* (Delhi, reprint 1996), pp. 376-88. See also Sinha, *Post-Gupta Polity: A.D. 500-700*, pp. 66-88.

[39] Bhattacharyya, "Nalanda Plate of Dharmapaladeva," *EI* XXIII, p. 291, lines 5-7.

[40] Majumdar and Misra, "The Jājilpārā Grant of Gopāla II, Year 6," *JAS.L* XVII.2, p. 142, lines 21-22.

[41] The word *naya* qualifies two 'subdivisions' of Rājagṛha *viṣaya* in the Nalanda plate of Devapāla. See Shastri, "The Nalanda Copper-plate of Devapaladeva," *EI* XVII, p. 321, line 26.

plate of Devapāla, was "the illustrious ruler of the Vyāghrataṭī *maṇḍala*."[42] Considering that in all the other Pāla charters in which the term *maṇḍala* occurs, a *maṇḍala* is constantly included in a *viṣaya*, it may well be that the great importance of this ruler and his place in the central royal court inverted the common relation between a *viṣaya* and a *maṇḍala*. The court poet in fact qualifies Balavarmman as "the right hand of the king,"[43] and in so doing highlights his role in the kingdom and his relationship with king Devapāla. Unfortunately this is the only clear example we have of a relationship between a lesser ruler, his local territorial domain and the central Pāla court.

Along the same lines, we may also suggest that a change in the relations between a local ruler and the Pāla court may account for the change in name of some areas of the Pāla domains. In the Belwa grant of Mahīpāla I (c. 979-1027 AD), some of the land granted is said to lie within the Phāṇita *vīthī*. Remarkably, about 70 years later the grandson of Mahīpāla I, Vigrahapāla III, in an homonymous charter transferred parts of the village Lovanikāma which was attached to the Puṇḍarika *maṇḍala* within the Phāṇitavīthī *viṣaya*. Notably, what in the previous charter was a *vīthī* had become a *viṣaya* by the time of Vigrahapāla III.[44] Secondly, Puṇḍarika *maṇḍala*, which was mentioned independently in Mahīpāla's charter, appears here to have been incorporated into the new *viṣaya*. The ruling family in Phāṇita somehow managed to raise its political standing through a change which must have taken place not within the actual territory of the *vīthī* but at the royal court.[45]

The consideration made above that the presence in our inscriptions of agents bearing titles prefixed with the word *mahā* would indicate a stronger presence of royal authority may thus find further supporting evidence by what we have been arguing until now. Notably the Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti* was the area with the highest concentration of principalities. Unlike Śrīnagara and Tīra *bhuktis*, however, Puṇḍravardhana did not have many *mahā*-titled officers during the first period of Pāla rule. Thus it is conceivable that the two findings might refer to the same historical process. If this is so, the presence of many principalities and the absence of *mahā*-titled officers would indicate a lesser hold on the land by the Pāla kings. Going back now to

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[42] *Ibid.*, p. 326, verse 23.
[43] *Ibid.*, p. 326, verse 22.
[44] See footnotes 33-34 above.
[45] The fact that the term *vīthī* was not eliminated but remained as part of the denomination of the new *viṣaya* may infer that the change was not an administrative one but involved a real increase in the political authority of the old *vīthī*'s ruling family. If on the other hand the term *vīthī* referred to the smallest unit of Pāla political organisation, it would be expected that the name be dropped from the new denomination.

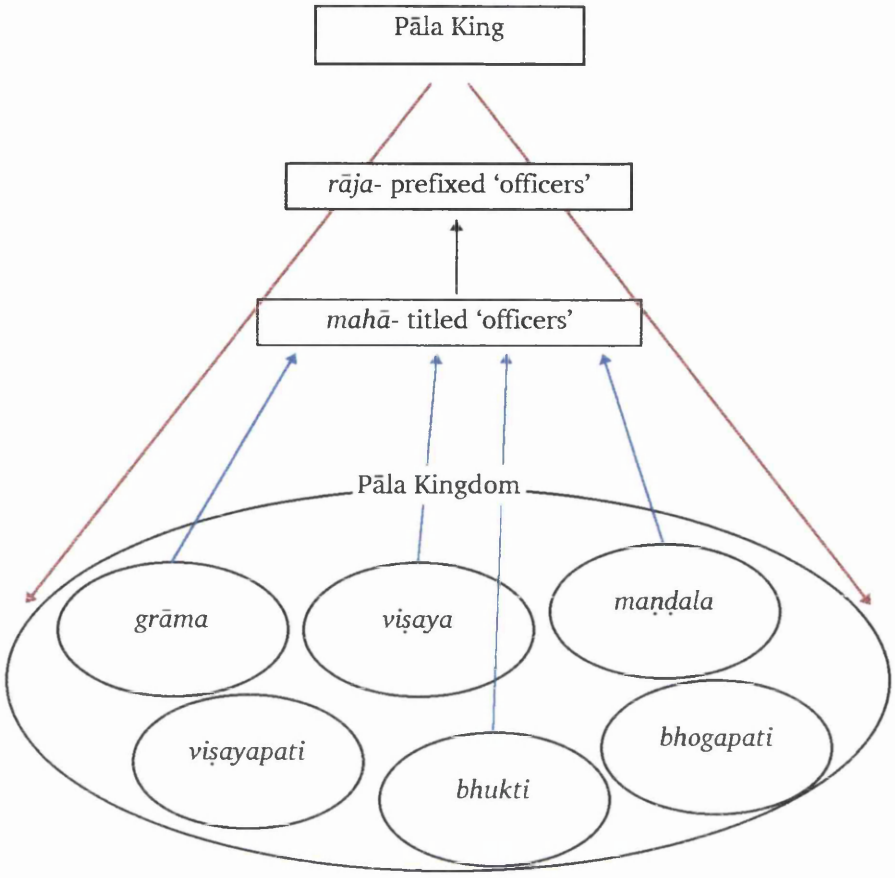
the lists of officers present in our inscriptions, I would then suggest that the *viṣayapatis*, the *bhogapatis*, the *grāmapatis*, the *rājasthānīyoparikas* etc., i.e. those officers who seemingly had a direct relation to a territory, constituted some kind of local lords, traditionally linked to a geographical area and ruling over it. The fact that in Pāla inscriptions these officers are either mentioned last or not at all might signify the continuous expansion of Pāla political hold on their kingdom.

The last conclusion rests on the understanding that *mahā*-titled officers and local lords (i.e. *viṣayapatis*, *bhogapati*, *grāmapati* etc.) are one and the same people. The distinction is their relationship with the Pāla court. It is the integration of local units of lordships within the paramount kind of lordship represented by the Pāla court, which transforms a *bhogapati* into a *mahāsāndhivigrahika,* or a *mahākṣapaṭalika,* or a *mahāsāmanta*, and so on. The royal charters then, being themselves records issued by the political centre, highlight not the local power base of the various lords, but their relation with the king and his court. This may explain the importance given to the *mahā*-titled officers as against other kinds of political agents. Notably, 'local lords' are not kinds of independent units outside the Pāla kingdom. On the contrary, they were part and parcel of Pāla political hierarchy. The fact that *viṣayapatis* and *bhogapatis* are mentioned last or not at all indicates that they simply occupied the lower tiers of Pāla political hierarchy and therefore their political standing at the Pāla court was marginal. However, the attention is here drawn to fix chronologically the historical process which saw *viṣayapatis* and *bhogapatis* precede and become the *mahā*-titled agents of our inscriptions. An illustration of this process is offered in diagram 5 below. The change may also be envisaged as a transformation of local lords into *mantrins*, *sacivas*, *amātyas*, *tantrādhikārins* (i.e. officer in charge of the administration), *vidheyas* etc.[46] since these titles highlight the role of a person *vis à vis* the royal court and the kingdom it represented. In fact we have some evidence that these ministers were indeed local lords.

[46] It is difficult to figure out the political hierarchy these titles indicated. *Mantrin*, *saciva* and *amātya* are often indistinctly translated as ministers. In one of our inscriptions, Yaśodāsa is said to have been made first a *mantrin*, then a *saciva* and eventually a *tantrādhikārin*. From the context it seems that the three offices represented the progressive enhancement of Yaśodāsa's political standing. See Sircar, "Bhaturiya Inscription of Rajyapala," *EI* XXXIII, p. 151. For a comprehensive treatment of this terminology see Sinha, *Post-Gupta Polity: A.D. 500-700*, pp. 45-65.

Diagram 5

The Development of Pāla Political Hierarchy



In the already mentioned charter of Vaidyadeva (beginning of the 12th century), the latter is depicted as a former *saciva* of Kumārapāla. The important point however is that this *saciva* was the lord of Champakā (i.e. *champakeśa*),[47] that is, the capital city of Aṇga,[48] an area located to the South-west of Bengal comprising the Munghyr and the Bhagalpur districts of Bihar. Notably Vaidyadeva's role as a minister was to look after the kingdom "in all its parts."[49] This was what qualified his place at Kumārapāla's royal court.

We may gather further evidence from the *Rāmacarita* as well. There it is said that Rāmapāla in order to successfully recover Varendra had to rally the support of the *sāmantas*.[50] This he did by giving them "presents of land and enormous wealth,"[51]

[47] Arthur Venis, "Copper-plate Grant of Vaidyadeva, King of Kāmarūpa," *EI* II (1894), p. 351, line 15.
[48] Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Delhi, reprint 1990), entry "campa."
[49] Venis, "Copper-plate Grant of Vaidyadeva, King of Kāmarūpa," *EI* II, p. 355, verse 12.
[50] *Rāmacarita*, I.44B.
[51] *Ibid.*, I.45B.

which could infer that because of the military strength of Rāmapāla, they were re-established as the heads of *viṣayas*, *grāmas* etc. Although it is not always easy to identify the places over which these *sāmantas*,[52] who joined the fight for the liberation of Varendra, exercised their lordship, it is clear that most of them were petty rulers, located in the areas of Bengal and Bihar, and enjoying sovereignty over little more than a few villages.[53] These petty rulers were very likely the former *sāmantas* or ministers of the Pālas who either broke free from Pāla suzerainty after the demise of the kingdom in Varendra, or were themselves caught up in the rebellion and were now under Kaivarta suzerainty. In either case, they moved from being lords to 'local lords', signifying thus their affiliation or re-affiliation to the Pāla court.

So far I have stressed the importance of the relationships between local lords and the central Pāla court in the overall organisation of the polity. However it should also be stressed that a local lord could occupy an important role at court on the basis of his actual role as a local ruler. The two dimensions go together. This allows us to understand a well established practice all through the Pāla period in North-eastern India. In the eulogy (i.e. *praśasti*) of Guravamiśra (second half of the 9th century), we come to know of a family of *brāhmaṇas* who were hereditary servants of the Pāla kings. Hence it is said that Garga was the adviser of Dharmapāla and his son Dharbapāṇi was minister of Devapāla. His grandson Kedāramiśra consecrated Sūrapāla I and the latter's son, Guravamiśra, was held in high esteem by Nārāyaṇapāla.[54] Similarly, in the charter of Vaidyadeva quoted above, we are told that Vaidyadeva himself belonged to a family of hereditary ministers. His grandfather Yogadeva served under Vigrahapāla III and his father Bodhideva was minister of Rāmapāla.[55] More interesting still is the reference we find in Mahendrapāla's charter (first half of the 9th century). There the *mahāsenāpati* Vajradeva, the *dūtaka* of the grant, is praised as a descendant of an illustrious family. His father Nārāyaṇa was made the chief (*adhipati*) of the Darddaraṇya *maṇḍala* by

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[52] See *ibid.*, II.5B-6B.

[53] See *Rāmacarita*, commentary on II.5B-6B, pp. 126-28.

[54] F. Kielhorn, "Badal Pillar Inscription of the Time of Narayanapala," *EI* II (1894), pp. 160-67. Notably, Dharbapāṇi's son, Someśvara, is not explicitly mentioned as serving any of the Pāla kings. I would speculate that Someśvara might have been at the service of Mahendrapāla, a recently known king of the Pāla dynasty, who was the son of Devapāla and elder brother of Śūrapāla I. For unknown reasons Mahendrapāla is not mentioned by any of the Pāla sources, except his own copper-plate. Again as a matter of speculation the fact may be explained with dynastic troubles occurred at the death of Devapāla. It is to be noted then, that Guravamiśra recurs as the *dūtaka* in the Bhagalpur grant of Nārāyaṇapāla; see Hultzsch, "The Bhagalpur Plate of Narayanapala," *IA* XV, pp. 304-10.

[55] Venis, "Copper-plate Grant of Vaidyadeva, King of Kāmarūpa," *EI* II, pp. 354-55, verses 2-5.

Dharmapāla,[56] and it is likely that Vajradeva replaced his father as the chief of that *maṇḍala*. The presence of hereditary ministers in the Pāla court once again points to the territorial power base which supported the ministerial role of these people. In other words, they were hereditary ministers because they were first hereditary lords in their respective domains.

To sum up our findings and organise them in a coherent political picture we may quote a late Pāla period inscription from Western Bihar. A very interesting inscription was discovered in 1961 on what seems to be part of a stone pillar. The inscription refers itself to the 14th regnal year of king Madanapāla (i.e. c. 1157 AD) and records the grant of a village to a Buddhist monastery. The inscription is unique because, as far as I know, it is the only one related to the Pāla kings which records a land grant whose donor is not a Pāla king himself. Besides, the inscription is important also for the information it relays about the political stratification in the Monghyr area of the Pāla kingdom. Thus Sārthadevikā, the queen (*rājñī*) of *mahāmāṇḍalika* Jaṣkapāla (or Yakṣapāla), during the reign (*rājye*) of Pīṭhīpati Āchārya Devasena, in the victorious reign (*vijaya rājye*) of Madanapāla, granted the village of Khaṇḍapāṭaka to the Dhavala monastery (*saṅgha*).[57] Notably, there are here three layers of political authority. In Madanapāla's kingdom, Pīṭhīpati Āchārya Devasena is said to be a ruler, and from additional information found in the *Rāmacarita*, we may deduce that his rule extended to Maghada (i.e. the Patna-Gaya region of Bihar).[58] The domain of his lordship approximately tallied then with the old Śrīnagara *bhukti* of the Monghyr plate of Devapāla. What is more, within this area another ruler exerted his lordship, the *mahāmāṇḍalika* Jaṣkapāla. This sort of stratification, I suggest, was the norm in all the

[56] Ramesh and Iyer, "Māldā District Museum Copper-plate Charter of Mahendrapāladeva, Year 7," *EI* XLII, p. 23, line 62. Notably, the real donor of this grant might have been Vajradeva himself. The Buddhist grant and the Buddhist faith of the *mahāsenapati*, which his name seems to betray, might support the hypothesis. This deduction may explain why this grant had two *dūtakas* and why the eulogy of Vajradeva's family is here included.

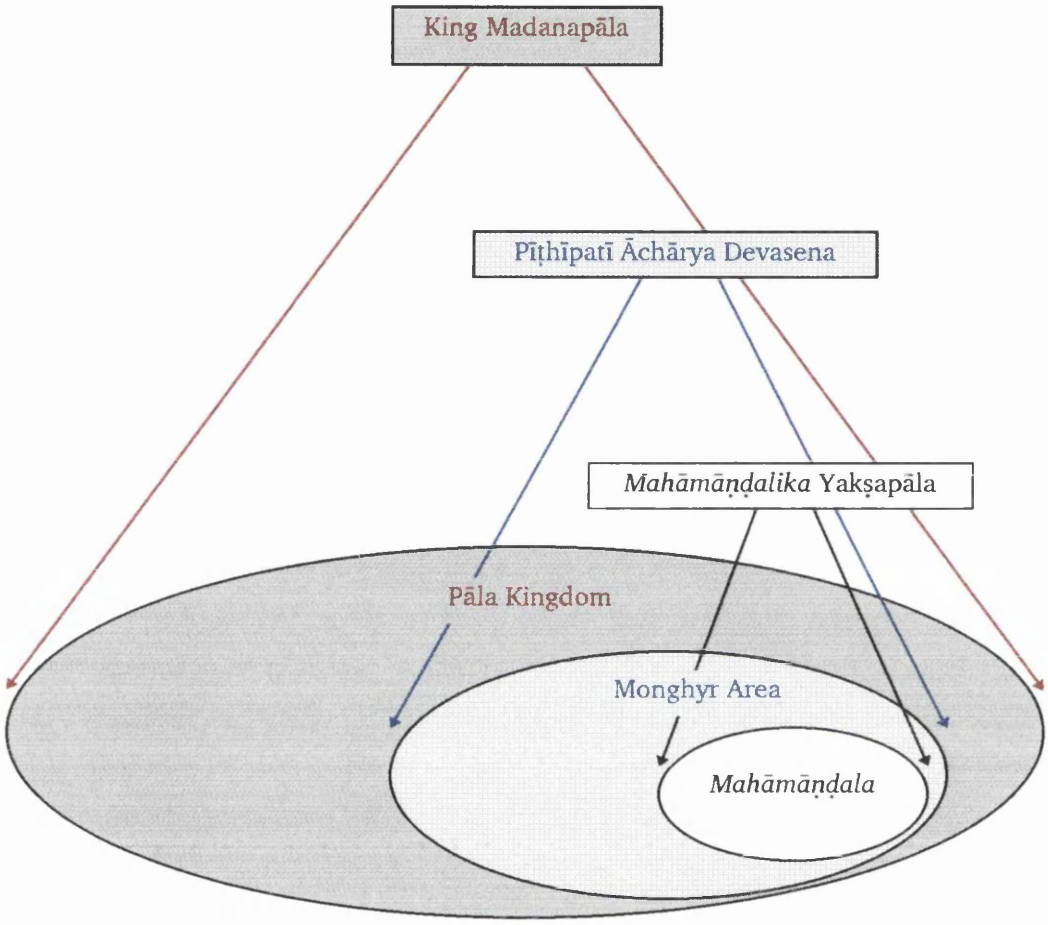
[57] D.C. Sircar, "Three Inscriptions from Bihar," *EI* XXXVI (1965-66), pp. 42-44.

[58] Mathana or Mahaṇa, the maternal uncle of king Rāmapāla whose help was instrumental in recovering Varendra, is said to have defeated Pīṭhīpati Devarakṣita king of Magadha; see *Rāmacarita* II.8B and commentary on pp. 128-29. What is more, in the Sarnath inscription of Kumaradevī, one of the wives of Govindachandra Gāhaḍavāla of Kanauj, it is said that Mahaṇa was the king of Aṅga (i.e. modern Monghyr and Bhagalpur districts in Bihar), within the Gauda country (i.e. the Pāla kingdom). After his defeat of Devarakṣita, Mahaṇa bestowed on the latter his daughter Śaṅkaradevī, the mother of Kumaradevī; see Sten Konow, "Sarnath Inscription of Kumaradevi," *EI* IX (1907-08), pp. 319-28.

Pāla domains.[59] The following diagram graphically illustrates it.

Diagram 6

Pāla Political Stratification Elaborated from Sārthadevikā's Inscription (circa 1157 AD)



Unfortunately, the literary genre of inscriptional records says little of the financial and military arrangements existing between the ranks of the Pāla political hierarchy. However, as the charter of Vaidyadeva indicates, the loyalty of the various lords to the Pāla monarch must have involved military support as well as tribute.

[59] The fragmentary Siyān stone slab inscription of the time of Nayapāla (11th century) may refer to a subordinate relationship between the Pāla king and the king of Suhma-*deśa* (Southwest Bengal). See D.C. Sircar, "Three East Indian Inscriptions of the Early Medieval Period," *Journal of Ancient Indian History* VI (1972-73), pp. 39-47.

3. The structure of the Gupta polity

Except for the three main *bhuktis* and the three *viṣayas* of Koṭīvarṣa, Pañchanagarī and Gayā, all the remaining 'subdivisions' of Pāla times do not appear in earlier Gupta inscriptions. The entirety of the area did, however, constitute the eastern territories of the Gupta empire, as numerous copper-plate inscriptions of the 5th and 6th centuries amply bear out. In order to highlight the specificity and historical evolution of Pāla political organisation, I now propose to survey briefly the structure of the Gupta lordships as they emerge from four contemporary land-sale inscriptions. Budhagupta was the ruling emperor when the four land-sale inscriptions were issued. Three of them transfer land in North Bengal (the Pāhārpur,[60] Dāmodarpur3 and Dāmodarpur4[61] copperplates), while one refers to a land transaction in Monghyr district, Bihar (the Nandapur copperplate[62]). In the Pāhārpur plate the request to purchase a dwelling place and a plot of waste land (*khilakṣetra*) is addressed to the so called 'executive officers' (*āyuktakas*) of the city of Puṇḍravardhana, to the city council (*adhiṣṭānādhikaraṇa*) and to its head (*nagara-śreṣṭhin*). The council refers the matter to the record keepers (*pustapāla*) who after having given their assent to the transaction, refer back to the *adhikaraṇa* which eventually approves the petition. Once approved, the *adhikaraṇa* instructs the village elders of the locality were the land has been sold to demarcate the plot. The same kind of procedure is found in the two Dāmodarpur plates. Here a new officer is encountered, the *uparikamahārāja*, who is considered a local governor, the representative of the imperial authority in Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*. In Dāmodarpur4, the *uparikamahārāja* Jayadatta appoints Saṇḍaka the *āyuktaka* of Koṭīvarṣa who administers the same city together with the guild-president of the town (*nagara-śreṣṭhin*) Ribhupāla (who is also the prospective purchaser), the merchant (*sārthavāha*) Vasumittra, the chief artisan (*prathama-kulika*) Varadatta and the chief scribe (*prathama-kāyastha*) Viparapāla. This was the council (*adhiṣṭhānādhikaraṇa*) of Koṭīvarṣa. In Dāmodarpur3 instead the council's composition was different. Here we find leading men (*mahattaras*), the village heads (*grāmikas*) and the 'householders'

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[60] This inscription has been dated to 479 AD, and was published by K.N. Dikshit, "Paharpur Copper-plate Grant of the Gupta Year 159," *EI* XX (1929-30), pp. 59-64.

[61] These two inscriptions have both been dated to 483 AD and were published by R.G. Basak, "The Five Damodarpur Copper-plate Inscriptions of the Gupta Period," *EI* XV (1919-20), pp. 113-45. The two plates at study here are no. 3 and 4 on pp. 134-41.

[62] This inscription has been dated to 489 AD and was published by N.G. Majumdar, "Nandapur Copper-plate of the Gupta Year 169," *EI* XXIII (1935-36), pp. 52-56; see also J.C. Ghosh, "Notes on the Nandapur Copper-plate of the Gupta year 169," *EI* XXIV (1937-38), pp. 126-27.

(*kuṭumbins*), which together made up the *grāmāṣṭakulādhikaraṇa* (possibly a local court originally made up of eight people or family heads).[63] The difference in the composition of these two local bodies can be explained by the fact that in Dāmodarpur4 we are dealing with a city, Koṭīvarṣa, while in Dāmodarpur3 we are dealing with a village, Palāśavṛndaka. In both cases, however, the local bodies were made up of local leading men. In Palāśavṛndaka, once the *pustapālas* gave their assent, the *mahattaras* of the village (Caṇḍagrāma) involved in the transaction, surveyed the land and marked it off. Although the section relating the concluding phase of the transaction in the Dāmodarpur4 is badly effaced and cannot be read, it probably described a very similar procedure. In the last plate, the one found in Monghyr, the *viṣayapati* Chatramaha petitions the *adhikaraṇa* of the *agrahāra* village Ambila for some land. Again the *pustapālas* are called in and having obtained their clearance, the transaction is concluded after payment of the established amount of money. Unlike the other previous charters, there is no reference here to the land being demarcated by leading men of the village which could mean that the job was carried out by the *adhikaraṇa* itself.[64]

From this quick survey, we may surmise that land transactions in middle and late Gupta times in North-eastern India were referred to local bodies called *adhikaraṇas* which were made up of the leading people of the localities. There are no details of how membership to these offices was attained. Besides, it is worth noting that the *adhikaraṇa* "was not an all-comprehensive village body since different social groups in the village (*kuṭumbins, brāhmaṇas, mahattaras*) figure separately from the *adhikaraṇa*."[65] In the case of Dāmodarpur3 the *mahattaras* and other inhabitants of the locality in which land was being sold, were informed and their assent to the land transfer was possibly sought. It was they who eventually marked off the land. What is important, however, is that these local bodies, assisted by the leading men of villages, handled administrative matters in the name of the imperial authority, which was represented at the local level by *āyuktakas* and *pustapālas*, possibly appointed by a

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[63] The composition of the *grāmaṣṭhakulādhikaraṇa* of this and other records is debated among scholars. I follow here the reading of Vishwa Mohan Jha, "Settlement, Society and Polity in Early Medieval Rural India," *The Indian Historical Review* XX.1-2 (July 93-Jan. 94), pp. 41-42. B.D. Chattopadhyaya reads the same record in the sense of *mahattaras, grāmikas, kuṭumbins* and others as associated to the *adhikaraṇa* but not constituting it: *Aspects of Rural Settlements and Rural Society in Early Medieval India* (Calcutta, 1990), p. 37-38. He follows in this the editing and translation of Basak, "The Five Damodarpur Copper-plate Inscriptions of the Gupta Period," *EI* XV, p. 137.

[64] For my discussion of the four land-sale inscriptions of Budhagupta, I have relied on Morrison, *Political Centers and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal*, pp. 127-31.

[65] Chattopadhyaya, *Aspects of Rural Settlements...*, p. 37.

higher imperial authority such as the governor of the *viṣaya* or *bhukti*. The governor of *bhukti* was probably called *uparika* even though it is notable that towards the late Gupta period an *uparikamahārāja* occupied the post in Puṇḍravardhana. The title however varied so that in different *bhuktis* the same function was carried out by a *kumārāmātya* or a *rājaputra* as was the case for instance in Nagara and Magadha *bhuktis*.[66] *Viṣayapati* was instead the 'officer' at the head of a *viṣaya*. The relationship between these imperial agents and the different levels of local organisations (i.e. *adhikaraṇas*) is not always easy to discern. It is however reasonable to think that they headed the local offices at the level of district towns. This supposedly was the case with the *uparikamahārāja* of the district town of Koṭivarṣa seen in Dāmodarpur4. Though the charters presented here do not have the seal of the issuing office, it was customary for the office which handled the transaction to affix its own seal.[67] As far as the purchasers are concerned they belonged to different categories of people; in our charters we encounter a *brāhmaṇa* couple, a village head (*grāmika*), the head of a *viṣaya* (*viṣayapati*) and a merchant (*śreṣṭhin*). The land being sold was generally waste or uncultivated and it was apportioned in such a way as not to hinder the farming activities of the villagers. This is mentioned in several copperplates such as the Nandapur inscription already referred to above.[68]

The foregoing analysis suggests the existence of a kind of local administration which was more sophisticated than the structure of Pāla political organisation. Indeed, such a local system of administration would also contradict the theory and practice of lordship as I have outlined so far, in that it envisages a level of political organisation which is apparently established on relationships other than those of ownership. However it may be noticed that in the four charters dealt with here and in all the others originating from this same region and period, the relationship of *viṣayapatis*, *uparikas* and *āyuktakas* with the various kinds of *adhikaraṇas* is not at all explained. Although I postulated that such imperial officers may have had a leading role as the head of the latter, evidence is not forthcoming. What we do know is that in Dāmodarpur3 the *uparika* of Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti* was *mahārāja* Brahmadatta who was "favoured by

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[66] Yamazaki Toshio, "Some Aspects of Land-Sale Inscriptions in Fifth and Sixth Century Bengal," *Acta Asiatica* 43 (Aug. 1982), p. 31.

[67] Damodarpur plate number five instead has been found with its seal. It reads *Koṭivarṣādhiṣṭhānādhi[karaṇasya]*, i.e. 'of the office of Koṭivarṣa': Basak, "The Five Damodarpur Copper-plate Inscriptions of the Gupta Period," *EI* XV, p. 140.

[68] Toshio, "Some Aspects of Land-Sale Inscriptions...," *Acta Asiatica* 43, pp. 20-21.

his majesty's feet."[69] In Dāmodarpur4 the *uparika* of the same *bhukti* was Jayadatta who, "favoured by his majesty's feet,"[70] appointed the *āyuktaka* Śaṇḍika as the head of Koṭivarṣa *viṣaya*. Similarly, in both Dāmodarpur1 and 2 the *uparika* of Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti* was Chirātadatta who, 'favoured by his majesty's feet',[71] appointed the *kumārāmātya* Vetravarman as the head of Koṭivarṣa *viṣaya*. The expression 'favoured by his majesty's feet' (*tatpādaparigṛhītasya*)[72] does not necessarily mean that the *uparika* was appointed by the emperor himself, but it highlights the relation of subjection and loyalty that the *uparika* had with the emperor. Significantly the relationship of political agents below the rank of the *uparika* and the emperor is not in evidence. On the contrary, the political standing of such agents is conceptualised only according to their relation with the *uparika* himself, who is said to appoint (*tanniyuktaka*)[73] them. Unfortunately the exact meaning of terms like *uparika* and *āyuktaka* is not clearly known. As already mentioned above, these are generally taken to indicate a governor of a *bhukti* and an executive officer respectively. However, to better characterise these terms we may refer to two short literary references. The first, taken from the commentary on the *Yājñavalkya smṛti* of Viśvarūpācārya (c. 8th century AD), qualifies the *uparika* as a minister (*saciva*).[74] The second is taken instead from the *Kāmasūtra*, which depicts the *āyuktaka* as one "who could impose forced labour on peasant women to serve his own needs."[75]

On the basis of these considerations I would like to suggest that these so called officers of the imperial administration (*āyuktakas*, *uparikas*) were rulers more than administrators. The same title *mahārāja* given to some of them would seem to confirm my suggestion, as would the kind of segmented political organisation which saw the *uparika* linked to the Gupta emperor, the *āyuktaka* and others to the *uparika* etc. As a matter of speculation we may also hypothesise that the names of the various *uparikas* of the Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti* ending in *datta* might conceal the existence of a family which hereditarily occupied the place of *uparika* in Puṇḍravardhana. This however does not explain the role and function of the various *adhikaraṇas vis à vis uparikas*, *āyuktakas* etc. My hypothesis is that *adhikaraṇas* constituted a sort of parallel political

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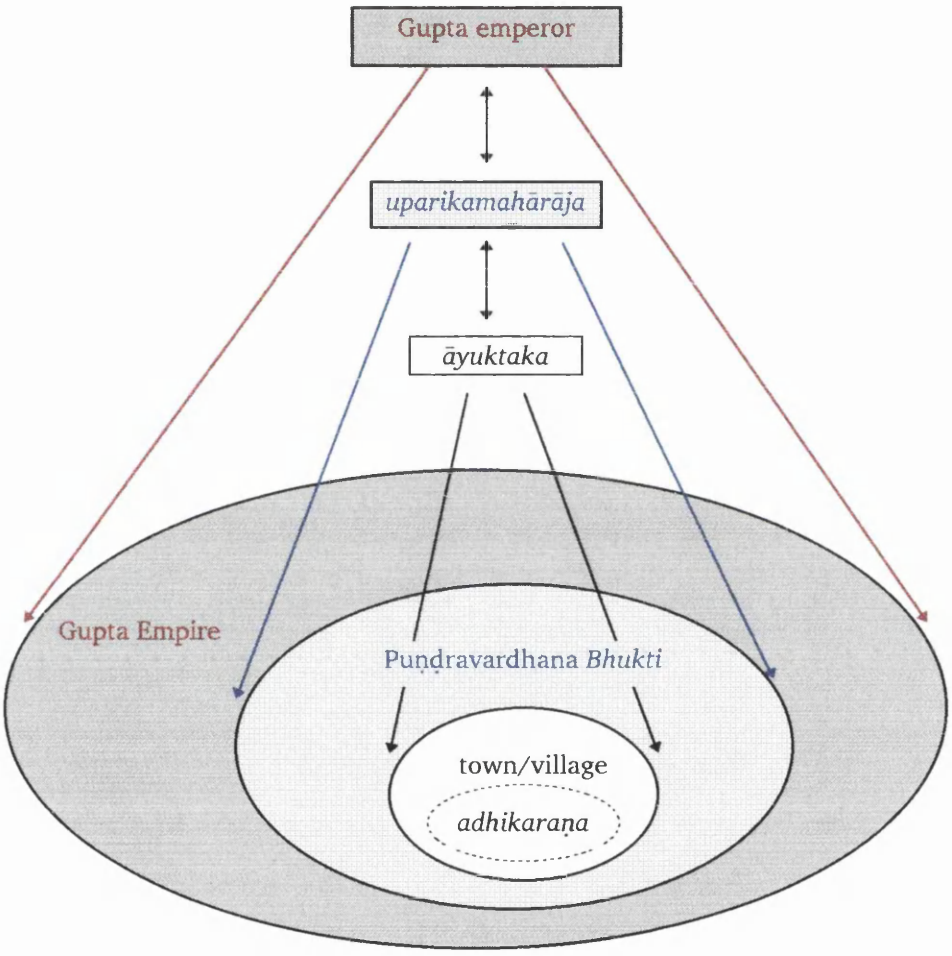
[69] Basak, "The Five Damodarpur Copper-plate Inscriptions of the Gupta Period," *EI* XV, p. 136.
[70] *Ibid.*, p. 140.
[71] *Ibid.*, pp. 131; 134. Dāmodarpur1 and 2 are separated from each other by 5 years and are dated to the Gupta Era 124 and 129 (i.e. 443-4 and 448-9 AD) respectively.
[72] *Ibid.*, p. 138, line 2. The expression can be found in all the five plates from Dāmodarpur.
[73] *Ibid.*, p. 138, line 3.
[74] Quoted in Ramachandra Dikshitar, *The Gupta Polity* (Madras, 1952), p. 159.
[75] *Kāmasūtra*, V.5.5, quoted in Md. Aquique, *Economic History of Mithila* (New Delhi, 1974), p. 53.

organisation which as such had nothing or little to do with Gupta political organisation. But before delving into this we need to survey the kind of political set up in place in other Gupta territories beyond the Northeast. Diagram 7 below visually captures Gupta political stratification in the Northeast.

Diagram 7

Gupta Political Stratification Elaborated from North-eastern Land Transactions (5th and 6th centuries AD)



From several inscriptions we come to know that throughout the Gupta domains a number of *mahārājas* and other sorts of political agents exercised political authority. In the time of Chandragupta II, a certain *mahārāja*, descendant of the Sanakānika family of *mahārājas*, had a short inscription engraved in the Udayagiri cave (Madhya Pradesh, 400-1 AD) to commemorate a religious gift. His relationship with the reigning Gupta monarch is rendered with the expression 'meditating on the feet of the emperor'

(*chandragupta-pād-ānuddhyātasya*).[76] A few years later *mahārāja* Naravarman of Daśapura (i.e. Mandasor, Madhya Pradesh), another descendant of a family of *mahārājas*, had an other inscription engraved on a rock (404-5 AD).[77] Significantly about thirty-two years later, during the reign of Kumāragupta I, the guild of oil-men of the same town made a religious donation. At the time the *nṛpa* (ruler, king) of the town was Bandhuvarman who apparently belonged to the same family as *mahārāja* Naravarman.[78] Progressing in time, we know that in the year 464-5 AD, when Skandagupta was the *mahārājādhirāja*, the *brāhmaṇa* Devaviṣṇu made an endowment for the maintenance of a lamp for the Sun god housed in a temple at Indrapura (i.e. Indor, Uttar Pradesh). The important information however relates to the *viṣayapati* Sarvanāga whose authority supposedly extended over Indrapura. The religious endowment is said to "increase the enjoyment" (*bhog-ābhivriddhaye*) of the *viṣayapati*'s land Antarvedī.[79] Noticeably the word *bhoga* used to signify the relationship of the *viṣayapati* with his *viṣaya* denotes a fuller kind of possession and hence a relation of lordship. This same relation is underlined by the fact that Sarvanāga was 'accepted with favour by his (i.e. Skandagupta's) feet' (*tat-pāda-parigṛhītasya*).[80]

Of interest is also the Eran (Madya Pradesh) pillar inscription of the time of Budhagupta.[81] The pillar was erected in the name of god Janārdhana by *mahārāja* Māṭṛviṣṇu and his younger brother Dhanyaviṣṇu, obedient to and favoured by him (*tad-anuvidhāyin tat-prasāda-parigṛhītena*).[82] At the time of the erection of the pillar, *mahārāja* Suraśmichandra was governing (*palāyati*)[83] the territory between the Kāliṇḍi and the Narmadā rivers. Although the relation between *mahārāja* Suraśmichandra and *mahārāja* Māṭṛviṣṇu is not clear, it is possible that the latter was subjected to the former in the same way as *mahārāja* Suraśmichandra himself was subjected to Budhagupta, the

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[76] D.R. Bhandarkar, "Udayagiri Cave Inscription of Chandragupta II: the Year 82," *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* (*CII*) III (revised edition 1981), p. 243, line 1.
[77] D.R. Bhandarkar, "Mandasor Inscription of Naravarman: the Kṛta Year 461," *CII* III (1981), pp. 261-66. The object of the inscription is unclear.
[78] D.R. Bhandarkar, "Mandasor Inscription of Kumāragupta I and Bandhuvarman: the (kṛta) Years 493 and 529," *CII* III (1981), pp. 322-32.
[79] J.F. Fleet, "Indor Copper-plate Inscription of Skandagupta. The Year 146," *CII* III (1888), p. 70, line 4. Antarvedī has been identified with the area laying between the Ganges and the Yamuna rivers.
[80] *Ibid.*, p. 70, line 4. Incidentally it may be noted that in this case Antarvedī was a fairly big area and it would have constituted a *bhukti* according to North-eastern Indian standards. Yet, its lord was a *viṣayapati*. Once again it must be recognised that the so called territorial units of administration were not such. A *viṣayapati* may have been at the head of a *bhukti* and a *bhuktipati* of a *viṣaya*!
[81] J.F. Fleet, "Eran Stone Pillar Inscription of Budhagupta. The Year 165," *CII* III (1888), pp. 88-90.
[82] *Ibid.*, p. 89, line 8.
[83] *Ibid.*, p. 89, line 3.

ruler of the earth (*bhūpati*).[84] A similar situation seems to be portrayed in the Bhumara stone pillar inscription of the beginning of the 6th century.[85] The pillar was set up by a certain Śivadāsa, the son of the *grāmika* Vāsu, in the reign (*rājye*) of *mahārāja* Hastin at the village Āmbloda, in the *bhoga* of the *mahārāja* Śarvanātha. Both these kings as we saw earlier, were the scions of two dynasties, the Parivrājakas and the Ucchakalpas, which ruled in what used to be the Baghelkand division of Central India. From this inscription we learn that the title *mahārāja* was used also for rulers of *bhogas* in as much the same way in which the same title was used in North-eastern India for the *uparika* in charge of the Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*. What is more, the inscription seems to point out a relation of dependence between *mahārāja* Hastin, said to 'meditate on the feet of *mahādeva*' (*mahādeva-pādā-nuddhyāto*),[86] and *mahārāja* Śarvanātha, the *bhogika*.[87] Chart 1 on the next page, visually summarises Gupta stratification in the North as it obtains from the analysis of the above inscriptions.

This brief excursus into the Gupta evidence shows that political organisation in Gupta domains relied on local units of lordships headed by *mahārājas* or *viṣayapatis* whose functions were not of an administrative character. These people were in fact rulers in the full sense of the word though subordinated to the imperial authority. The link with the latter was often expressed with a reference to the emperor's feet. A clear example of how this political organisation came into being may be seen in the Junagadh rock inscription of Skandagupta.[88] After defeating the Huna army, Skandagupta is here said to have 'appointed many protectors in all the countries' (*sarvveṣu deśeṣu vidhāya goptṛn*).[89] Already the word *goptṛn*, which stands also for 'ruler' and of whom protection is the main function, tells us that these appointees were not simply bureaucrats or administrators, but actually possessed the land they ruled. The

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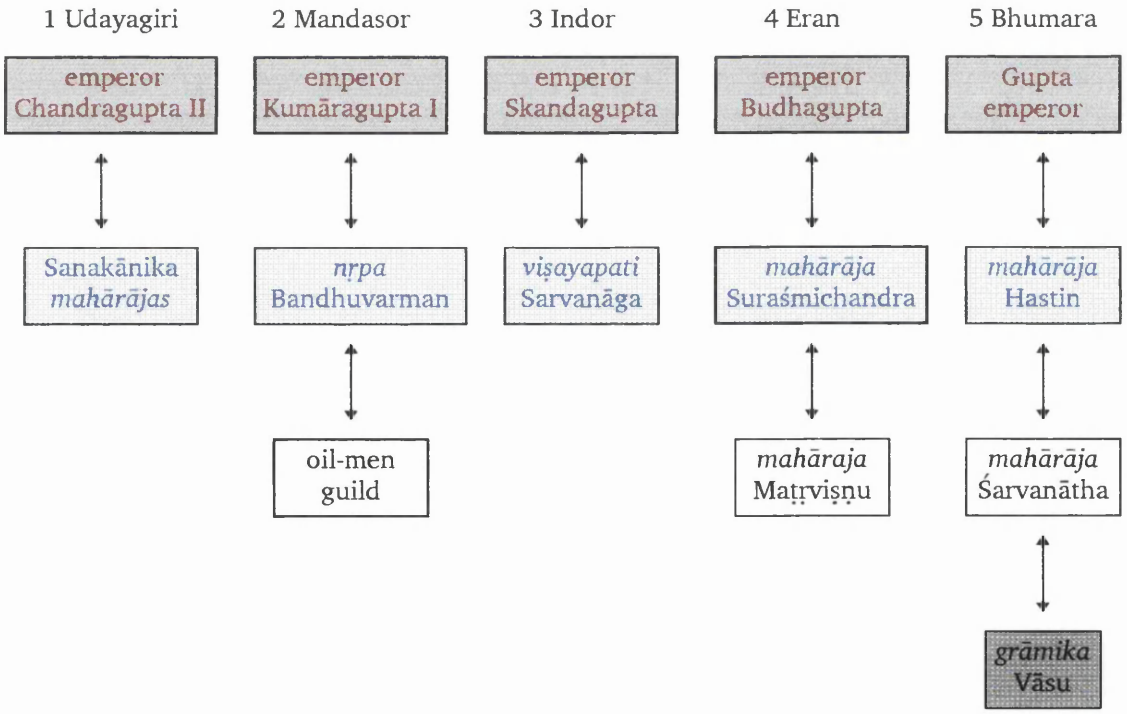
[84] *Ibid.*, p. 89, line 2.
[85] J.F. Fleet, "Bhumara Stone Pillar Inscription of the Maharajas Hastin and Sarvanatha," *CII* III (1888), pp. 110-12.
[86] *Ibid.*, p. 111, lines 1-2.
[87] Fleet, editing the inscription and not knowing how to explain the relationship between these two *mahārājas*, amended unnecessarily the text (*vala-yaṣṭi*) so that in his reading the pillar constituted a sort of boundary pillar (*valaya-yaṣṭi*) between the kingdoms of the two kings. See *ibid.*, p. 111, footnote 4. Besides, the inscription would also inform us of a third level of political organisation in the area, that of Śivadāsa the son of a *grāmika*, and possibly, a *grāmika* himself. A similar pillar inscription, referring itself to the time of Skandagupta (141 GE, i.e. 460-461 AD) and coming from the same area, informs us that another family of *grāmikas*, that of Varga, erected a *bala-yaṣṭi* i.e. 'a memorial pillar', further qualified as *gotra-śailikā* i.e. 'family stone': D.R. Bhandarkar, "Supiā Pillar Inscription of the Time of Skandagupta: the Year 141," *CII* III (1981), pp. 317-19.
[88] J.F. Fleet, "Junagadh Rock Inscription of Skandagupta. The Years 136, 137 and 138," *CII* III (1888), pp. 56-65. The place is located in the Kathiawad peninsula in Gujarat.
[89] *Ibid.*, p. 59, line 6.

inscription however goes on to tell us that Skandagupta was at pains to find a suitable ruler for the land of the Surāṣṭras. He finds it in Parṇadatta who, being the best among all his servants (*sarvveṣu bhṛtyeṣu*),[90] is deemed suitable to protect that land (*Surāṣṭr-āvani-pālanāya*).[91] The language used in this context leaves little doubt that Parṇadatta will not be an administrator but a ruler. His inner characteristics[92] resemble very closely the characteristics that a king must have and which we have mentioned in the previous chapter. Again the same task of giving protection is here considered a 'burden' which only Parṇadatta will be able to bear.[93] Additionally, the qualification of Parṇadatta as a 'servant' also defines his relation of subordination *vis à vis* Skandagupta. Parṇadatta was thus appointed ruler and the first act in his new capacity was to appoint his son Chakrapālita as ruler of the same city where the rock was inscribed. The relationship between the latter and his father is then manifested with the expression 'high devotion' (*parām bhaktim*),[94] which reminds us of the structure of personal affiliation which linked rulers of different ranks.

Chart 1

Examples of Gupta Political Stratification in North India (late 4th to 6th centuries AD)



[90] *Ibid.*, p. 59, line 8.
[91] *Ibid.*, p. 59, line 9.
[92] See *ibid.*, p. 62, lines 7-8.
[93] *Ibid.*, p. 62, line 8.
[94] *Ibid.*, p. 60, line 18.

Perhaps remarkably, the political structure which we found in North-eastern India is reproduced here in the relationships between Skandagupta, Parṇadatta and his son Chakrapālita. I would then suggest that throughout Gupta domains this was the basic structure of political organisation. Local rulers, either appointed by the emperor or recognised by him, enjoyed hereditary lordship over local territories. The latter were then divided in a number of other smaller territorial units of lordship, the loyalty of whose rulers was first towards their respective overlords, who were directly subjected to the paramount lordship of the emperor. The arrangement of the Pālas is thus identical for the Guptas: their polity was organised on units of lordships (principalities) linked together by a common reference to the royal court.

Apart from and beyond what has already been shown, the link between the local ruling aristocracy and the central Gupta court can also be inferred from the titles given in our inscriptions to the so called 'officers'. In both copper-plates of Samudragupta, Gopasvāmin is portrayed as the one who ordered the execution of the plates.[95] But while in the Gaya plate he is called the *akṣapaṭalādhikṛta* of Anyagrāma, in the Nālandā plate he is called *mahāpīlūpati*, *mahābalādhikṛta* and eventually, the *akṣapaṭalādhikṛta* of Anyagrāma.[96] The first two terms would refer to an officer in charge of elephants and armed forces respectively,[97] the third would indicate a sort of record keeper.[98] The interesting thing is that the first two titles necessarily relate Gopasvāmin's role to the Gupta kingdom at large, while the third, *akṣapaṭalādhikṛta*, is seemingly linked to a locality, the village Anyagrāma. More significant still are the titles given to the writers of the Parivrājaka charters. All but one of these appear to have been composed by members of the same family. Thus in the oldest known charter dated to the year 156 (i.e. of the Gupta Era) the writer is said to be "Sūryadatta, the great-grandson of the *amātya* Vakra, the grandson of the *bhogika* and *amātya* Naradatta and the son of the *bhogika* Ravidatta."[99] A few years later, in another charter, Sūryadatta will be titled *mahāsāndhivigrahika* (minister for peace and war),[100] as will

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[95] D.R. Bhandarkar, "Nālandā Copper-plate Inscription of Samudragupta: the Year 5," and "Gayā Copper-plate Inscription of Samudragupta: the Year 9," *CII* III (1981), pp. 224-31. The information on Gopasvāmin is found on p. 227, line 11 and on p. 231, line 15 respectively.
[96] *Ibid.*.
[97] Dikshitar, *The Gupta Polity*, pp. 219; 225.
[98] Sircar, *Indian Epigraphy*, p. 99.
[99] J.F. Fleet, "Khoh Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Hastin. The Year 156," *CII* III (1888), pp. 99-100, line 20.
[100] J.F. Fleet, "Khoh Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Hastin. The Year 163," *CII* III (1888), p. 105, line 28.

Sūryadatta's son Vibhudatta in the charter of the year 191.[101] It is clear then that the members of this family hereditarily occupied places of importance at the Parivrājaka court either as *amātyas* or *mahāsāndhivigrahikas*. These roles however were the result of their being *bhogikas*, that is, of having lordship over a particular locality.[102] On the other hand the existence of families who hereditarily occupied places at court, cannot be fully explained without reference to the local territorial lordship which such families enjoyed. One of these, for instance, had an important role at the height of Gupta power. During the reign of Kumāragupta I, a certain *mantri-kumārāmātya* Pṛthivīṣeṇa was nominated *mahābalādhikṛta* by the Gupta monarch.[103] His father Śikharasvāmin was himself the *mantri-kumārāmātya* of Chandragupta II.[104] Although there are no explicit references, it is very likely that this family occupied a hereditary place at court because it had actual power on the ground.

It remains to be seen how the various *adhikaraṇas* of North-eastern India fit in with the kind of Gupta political structure I have so far depicted. My suggestion is that they did not fit in at all, that is, they were not Gupta political institutions! This view is supported by the fact that *adhikaraṇas* do not appear in any other Gupta or Gupta period inscriptions outside the Northeast.[105] They most probably were local and traditional[106] institutions of an oligarchic nature, which were incorporated within the Gupta polity but which pre-existed and certainly outlived the same.[107] After all, the Gupta imperial formation was the resultant of a process of political integration which linked former 'autonomous spaces' into a coherent political network centred on the

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[101] J.F. Fleet, "Majhgawam Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Hastin. The Year 191," *CII* III (1888), p. 109, line 18.

[102] It is not clear how they came to be *bhogikas*. However, the point is that a court official was necessarily a lord. He might have been appointed by a higher authority or he might have been the traditional landlord of a specific locality. In either of the two cases the argument remains valid.

[103] D.R. Bhandarkar, "Karamḍāṃḍā Stone Inscription of Kumāragupta I: The Year 117," *CII* III (1981), p. 282, lines 7-8.

[104] *Ibid.*, p. 282, line 6.

[105] In the Sanchi Stone Inscription of Chandragupta II commemorating the religious donation of Amrakārdava, an officer of the emperor, the expression *pañcha-maṇḍalya* is read by Fleet as indicating a 'board of five' which he explained with reference to the modern institution of the 'panchayat'. Apart from the apparent anachronism of this explanation, the Sanskrit expression has been re-read to mean 'in a circle of five limbs', the five limbs indicating the five parts of the body (i.e. hands, knees and forehead) touching the ground in the act of prostration. See D.R. Bhandarkar, "Sāñchī Stone Inscription of Chandragupta II. The Year 93," *CII* III (1981), pp. 247-52; Sanskrit expression on p. 250, line 6; editor's comment on p. 251, footnote 2.

[106] In many of the inscriptions from North-eastern India the requests to buy particular plots of land are often followed by a reference to the 'traditional usage' of the area. See for instance Dikshit, "Paharpur Copper-plate Grant of the (Gupta) Year 159," *EI* XX, p. 62, line 5.

[107] *Adhikaraṇas* are found in inscriptions from the same area up until the 7th century. For a panoramic and comprehensive view of all the charters from this region and the changes in governmental practice reflected in them, see Morrison, *Political Centers and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal*, pp. 126-47.

Gupta imperial court. In other words, they were not 'society' opposed but related to the Gupta state, but were instead *encompassed political masteries* which functioned relatively autonomously within the overall *encompassing* political mastery of the Guptas. *Adhikaraṇas*, local principalities, guilds etc. were such 'incorporated lordships'. We do not have to forget in fact that *dharma*, embedded as it were in the notion of kingship was supposed to be represented in different times and places by different institutions. The *varṇa* template itself was the model for a proliferation of *dharmas* which involved the four estates, single villages, guilds and whatever represented tradition in general. Writes Manu: "Taking into consideration the laws of the castes, districts, guilds and families, a king who knows justice should establish the particular law of each."[108] What is more Yājñavalkya even establishes that "when another state (*pararāṣṭra*) is subjugated, even then the *ācāra*, *vyavahāra* and the *kulasthiti* of the subjugated state should continue in the form in which it existed under the previous king."[109]

In the Mandasor inscription of the time of Kumāragupta I, we may perhaps envisage, for instance, the existence of a guild whose powers *vis à vis* the local *mahārāja* might have been sufficiently consistent,[110] to constitute one of those 'autonomous spaces' to which I referred above. In this respect the charter of Viṣṇuṣeṇa[111] (c. 592 AD) issued somewhere in the Gujarat-Kathiawar region, may be significant to understand a policy which was possibly widespread in early medieval North Indian kingdoms. The charter informs that the community of merchants (possibly of Lohāṭā, the place of issue of the document) approached *mahārāja* Viṣṇuṣeṇa and requested him to grant an *ācāra-sthiti-pātra*[112] (a code of conduct) with which they could protect and favour their own people. The request was accepted and the result was a list of 72 rules. What is more, 13 years later the same charter detailing the rules of conduct was endorsed by *sāmanta* Avanti who instructed his own officials not to disturb merchants acting according to the regulations laid out by Viṣṇuṣeṇa.[113] This *ācāra-sthiti-*

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[108] W. Doniger with B.K. Smith tr., *The Laws of Manu* (London, 1991), VIII.41.
[109] *Yājñavalkya*, I.342-343, quoted in Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, "'Autonomous Spaces' and the Authority of the State: the Contradiction and its Resolution in Theory and Practice in Early India," B. Kölver ed., *Recht, Staat und Verwaltung in Klassichen Indien* (München, 1997), p. 9.
[110] Bhandarkar, "Mandasor Inscription of Kumāragupta I and Bandhuvarman: the (kṛta) Years 493 and 529," *CII* III (1981), pp. 322-32.
[111] This charter is edited by D.C. Sircar in *EI* XXX (1955-58), pp. 163-81. The same author deals with it in greater depth in *Studies in the Political and Administrative Systems in Ancient and Medieval India* (Delhi, reprint 1995), 176-98.
[112] *Ibid.*, p. 181.
[113] *Ibid.*, p. 182.

pātra thus proves the existence of a community of merchants which was ruled by an internal sort of legislation, relatively independent of both *mahārāja* Viṣṇuṣeṇa and *sāmanta* Avanti. What is more some of the 72 rules do not refer at all to the merchants themselves but to other people.[114] This points to the possibility that the community of merchants had jurisdiction not only over their own people but also over a territory where other people lived too. As a matter of fact, the *ācāra-sthiti-pātra* of Viṣṇuṣeṇa conceded or recognised 'an autonomous space' within the territory of his lordship. The 'autonomous space' remained, however, an encompassed lordship, because the code of conduct was after all the gift of Viṣṇuṣeṇa's 'grace' (*anugraha*), a term once again signalling the personal affiliation and hence subordination of the guild to Viṣṇuṣeṇa.

4. The early medieval North-eastern Indian polity

From the survey of political organisations in both the Pāla and Gupta social formations it has emerged that one or possibly the most important political process at work in both early medieval North Indian polities consisted in the progressive integration of local units of lordship within the paramount kind of sovereignty symbolically embodied and spatially represented by the central Pāla and Gupta courts respectively.[115] What we see then is the creation of a hierarchical chain of lordships including lords of different rank and status and headed by the *mahārājādhirāja*. Significantly this political chain corresponds exactly to the kind of agrarian hierarchy I tried to outline in the second chapter. Early medieval North Indian polity came in fact from the earth, "literally – from the mud and water tilled by poor peasants to produce agricultural surpluses that were appropriated by elites emerging from the peasant economy but eventually standing above it."[116] What I have called the process of political integration reinforced the political hold on the land that the early medieval Gupta and Pāla polities in time

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[114] *Ibid.*, for instance rules no. 4, p. 184, about apprehension of people suspected of a crime; no. 20, p. 187, about people not to be recruited for forced labour by the king; no. 40, p. 192, about fines for cows grazing in others' fields; no. 72, p. 198, about people who could be recruited for forced labour and the conditions for such a recruitment.

[115] Among the 'enjoyments' (*upabhogas*) of a king, the *Mānasollāsa* lists also *āsthanabhoga* or enjoyment of holding the *darbar*'; see G.K. Shrigondekar ed., *Mānasollāsa of King Someśvara* (Baroda, 1939, vol. 2), pp. 100-3. The section describes how a *darbar* is to be held. The position and seat of each and every dignitary is fixed. Space is divided and apportioned to each in reference to the centrality of the royal throne and so on. These courtly gatherings re-enacted the structure of the kingdom in a sort of dramatic court representation (see *ibid.*, "Introduction," pp. 16-19). The court ritual was the dramatisation of the kingdom's political hierarchy. See also R. Inden, "Hierarchies of Kings in Early Medieval India," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 15.1&2 (Jan.-Dec. 1981), pp. 99-125.

[116] Heitzman, *Gifts of Power...*, p. 19.

came to develop. The network of political relationships which linked in a single chain the various and territorially localised lordships resulted in a greater subjection of the peasantry. In fact, the longer the chain of political hierarchy, the greater the demands on the direct producers and, by extension, the stronger the political hold on them.

If such a structure characterised both the Pāla and Gupta social formations, there were also differences which distinguished them. From the available evidence it seems that the Pāla polity had a stronger political hold on the land. Apparently, in Pāla domains the king enjoyed more authority than the Gupta monarchs. Only one inscription[117] refers to a land transfer in which the Pāla king appears simply as a name without any role in the donation. The opposite is true in Gupta domains where most donations are carried out by local rulers. This anomaly may however be explained in two ways. First, Gupta lordship extended over a territory far larger than that of the Pālas. At the height of their power the Guptas had their suzerainty recognised by most of North India and possibly Central India as well. In such a scenario and with the kind of political network which I have tried to highlight above, it is reasonable to think that the greater the territory the more difficult the establishment of an effective political control. It may be the case, however, that the kind of political hold that the Pālas developed in their very restricted domains was somehow developed also by the Guptas in what might have been the core area of their territory. Second, we may refer to ideological and economic considerations. In the previous chapters it was remarked that the role of 'land' in the overall articulation of political authority was probably different in the Gupta social formation. Wealth was conceived in movable terms. While Pāla inscriptions ignore non-agrarian activities and organisations, Gupta inscriptions frequently deal with guilds, merchants, pecuniary donations and so on. In this respect we may also mention that the kind of urbanisation prevalent in Gupta times gave way, at least in Pāla North-eastern India, to a seemingly different one. This apparently was a phenomenon related to the shrinking of trading activities and to the dearth of coinage in Eastern India from the 6th-7th centuries. Archaeological excavations show a process of urban decay from Gupta times onwards,[118] a process all the more significant in the case of the ancient port town of Tāmralipti (modern Tamluk) in Southwest Bengal,[119] where urban decadence is related to a decline in long-distance maritime trade. The

[117] The Arma inscription in Sircar, "Three Inscriptions from Bihar," *EI* XXXVI, pp. 42-44.
[118] Vijay Kumar Thakur, "Decline or Diffusion: Constructing the Urban Tradition of North India During the Gupta Period," *The Indian Historical Review* XXIV.1-2 (July 1997- Jan. 1998), pp. 20-69.
[119] V.K. Thakur, "Trade and Towns in Early Medieval Bengal," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient (JESHO)* 30 (1987), p. 212.

Chinese pilgrim Yuan Chwang visited the town in the first half of the 7th century. He recounts that because of the valuable things stored in it the inhabitants were fairly prosperous.[120]

However, while archaeological excavations show a process of urban decay from the Gupta period onwards, they also show that in the post-Gupta period, a new phase of urbanisation occurred in several areas of Bengal. Excavations at Khana-Mihirer Dhipi (24-Parganas district), Rajabadidanga (Murshidabad district), Goswamikhanda (Burdwan district) and Banagarh (Dinajpur district) all located in modern day West Bengal, reveal very similar patterns of settlement. Unlike Tāmralipti, these sites seem to indicate continuous habitation in the Pāla period. What is more, a comparison of stratigraphic layers clearly shows that the layers dated to the Pāla period represented the apex of the sites' development. These urban centres, however, do not seem to indicate the survival of any mercantile activity. What is more, from the kind of brick-work unearthed, it may be inferred that these towns manifested a peculiar religious nature. At Khana-Mihirer Dhipi the dominant structure is represented by the remains of a polygonal *brāhmaṇical* temple,[121] also found at Rajabadidanga where the temple complex unearthed indicates Buddhist affiliation. This last site has been identified as the *Raktamṛttikā-vihāra* of Yuan Chwang's account.[122] The same conclusion may be drawn from the two remaining sites. The main structures which have come to light in the excavation at Goswamikhanda and Banagarh again seem to represent the remains of two temples which, from the nature of the artefacts recovered, are believed to have had a *brāhmaṇical* affiliation.[123] These last archaeological considerations may again underline the kind of economic and ideological shifts which specifically affected the Pāla polity. The new kind of urbanisation which seemingly took place in the Pāla period may thus indicate the changed nature of the political relationship between urban centres and agrarian peripheries. In this respect, B.M. Morrison noticed that most of the Gupta period charters from Bengal were issued from towns, the sites of political authority, while later charters were instead issued from garrisons, outside of the old urban political centres.[124]

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[120] Thomas Watters, *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India* (New Delhi, 2nd Indian edition 1973), pp. 189-90.
[121] Thakur, "Trade and Towns in Early Medieval Bengal," *JESHO* 30, p. 215.
[122] *Ibid.*, pp. 216-17.
[123] *Ibid.*, p. 217.
[124] Barrie M. Morrison, "Changing Forms of Government in Early Bengal," Muhammad Enamul Haq ed., *Abdul Karim Sahitya-Visarad Commemoration Volume* (Dacca, 1972), pp. 57-58.

It may thus be that the time separating the Guptas from the Pālas saw the transition from a political organisation less based on land to one which was more land centred. This would explain why the Gupta polity was considerably extended and why, conversely, the Pāla one (and all other contemporary social formations) was considerably smaller. This would also help explain why in North-eastern India, *adhikaraṇas* were left as the major political organs in matters of land transactions and why these same *adhikaraṇas* disappeared completely from the Pāla political scenario. Indeed if titles given to various political agents are meaningful indicators of a political reality, it is certainly interesting to notice that none of the Pāla 'officers' were named as *mahārāja* while in Gupta inscriptions that same title is fairly common. The absence of this title in Pāla sources might point to the kind of stronger political hold on the territory with which I have characterised the Pāla kings and their social formation.

However the difference between the two polities must not be overstated. Land was important in the Gupta polity and entered the sphere of lordship as an organising principle. *Mahāsāndhivigrahikas*, *sacivas* and the like were local lords in both the Pāla and Gupta formations. Despite the apparent political differences, it may be conceivable that the Gupta polity, on the basis of the economic and ideological considerations of the previous chapters, represented the model of political organisation for successive early medieval polities in North India. In a meaningful way the developments seen in the Pāla polity had their roots in developments first occurred in the Gupta imperial formation.

4.1 Land grants and lordship

The new urban centres of Pāla times, of modest dimensions if compared with previous ones, were "primarily nodal points in local exchange networks."[125] They were in other words the centres linking local agrarian areas to the political system centred on the Pāla court. Far from a closed and self-sufficient kind of economy what we witness here is the development of a tight economic texture for which the Pāla royal charters probably supplied new linkages and connections. The fact that these new cities were also often both the seats of major religious institutions and of local political power[126] allows us to infer that a complex network of economic, political and religious elements converged

[125] B.D. Chattopadhyaya, "Urban Centres in Early Medieval India: An Overview," B.D. Chattopadhyaya ed., *The Making of Early Medieval India* (Delhi, 1997), p. 181.
[126] Chattopadhyaya, "Urban Centres in Early Medieval India: An Overview," pp. 179-81.

together and gave shape to a deepened political hold on the land that the Pāla kingdom embodied.

This complex network was made up first by local principalities unified under the lordship of a paramount sovereign. This unifying process saw local lords being transformed into courtiers. Wars, marriages, royal appointments and local developments were all the mediums for such political integration. Remarkably, in Kalhaṇa's *Rājataraṅgiṇī* it is said that king Lalitāditya of Kashmir (8th century) "warned his successors not to leave with the cultivators of the land more than what was necessary for their bare sustenance and the cultivation of their fields, because, it was argued, if they were allowed to keep more wealth, they would, in a single year, become formidable Ḍāmaras strong enough to defy the king's command."[127] These *ḍāmaras* were nothing but substantial landlords. Other developments however were possible. In the Tumain inscription of the time of Kumāragupta I, we come to know that five merchant brothers constructed a temple for the god Pināki n. It is said that they "became the abodes of *kṣatriya* valour in Tumbavana."[128] The mention of '*kṣatriya* valour' allows us to speculate that these brothers had some sort of lordship over Tumbavana, something which they acquired possibly because of their wealth.

Apart from the royal appointments some examples of which have already been presented, for our period we hardly have any epigraphic evidence informing us of secular grants to officers. Scholars have often endeavoured to explain why secular grants are not recorded,[129] while there are abundant records of religious donations. Thus, the most common explanation for this anomaly argues that these former grants were "either oral or written on perishable materials."[130] This answer however simply begs the question! Why were secular grants not recorded on durable material in the same way religious donations were? The answer to this question lies in the nature of lordship and in the way it was implemented in early medieval polities.

In the previous chapters I often referred to lordship as a fuller form of ownership and I characterised the early medieval North Indian kingdom as a hierarchical chain which was at the same time economic, religious and political. In this

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[127] *Rājataraṅgiṇī*, IV.347-348, quoted in Sircar, *Studies in the Political and Administrative Systems...*, p. 13.
[128] D.R. Bhandarkar, "Tumain Inscription of Kumāragupta I: the Year 116," *CII* III (1981), p. 279, line 6. Tumain is a village in Madhya Pradesh.
[129] The question is taken up specifically by historians favouring a feudal interpretation of early medieval Indian polities. R.S. Sharma has tackled the problem forcibly. See his "Land Grants to Vassals and Officials in Northern India (c. A.D. 1000-1200)," *JESHO* IV (1961), pp. 70-105.
[130] *Ibid.*, p. 70.

chain what distinguished a relation of ownership from one of lordship was the ability and the right to exercise *daṇḍa*, the rod of power, the symbol of the protective function of a monarch. The so called officers of early medieval polities were in reality lords who exerted power on particular territories. This power was the power of ownership in general and the power of lordship in particular, that is, the power to exercise *daṇḍa*. Consequently, local lords did not need any charter (and in fact there are none), because lordship was their prerogative and entitlement. At the most, their lordship was recognised by the king but not necessarily conferred by him. A royal charter, in fact, tended to extend royal protection on the donee and his donation.[131] But in the territories of local lords they themselves afforded protection of their own domains.[132] This last consideration is also important in understanding the function and role of the many religious grants we find in our period *vis à vis* the central political power of early medieval kingdoms.

From the number and the extension of immunities usually granted to early medieval religious recipients, I concluded in chapter two that the grants conferred on the grantees some sort of lordship. However that statement has to be further qualified here. In practice the kind of lordship granted to religious donees was somewhat limited and subordinated to the granting authority. This is apparent in the following charters. The queen Prabhāvatigupta, daughter of Chandragupta II, in her Poona plates grants a village to the *brāhmaṇa* Chanālasvāmin. The donation ends warning future tampering with the grant in the following words: "Whosoever, disregarding this charter, shall make or cause to make the slightest molestation, upon him, on his being reported by the Brāhmaṇs, we will inflict punishment together with a fine."[133] A more interesting quotation can be found in one of the charters of Prabhāvatigupta's son Pravarasena II,

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[131] According to my argument, Sharma's hypothesis that from the end of the 10th century, seemingly secular grants become more and more common in North India (*ibid.*, p. 71), would first highlight a change in the political organisation of those polities and secondly qualify that change in the sense of an extension of royal power in the kingdom. The religious fashion in which even these secular grants are presented (*ibid.*, p. 103) would thus underline the political dependence of officers on their benefactors. Admittedly, such an understanding would imply a complete reversal of Sharma's attempt to demonstrate political decentralisation through land grants. "The comparative absence of secular copper-plate charters under the Pālas and the Senas suggests that ordinarily royal servants and feudal lords were not allowed to become powerful enough to claim a lasting basis for their grants:" R.S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism: c. 300-1200* (Calcutta, 1965), p. 208.

[132] Interestingly, Otto Brunner, studying the Austrian Middle Ages remarks: "...prince and nobles [...] were in fact armigerous and hence able to protect themselves [...] no wonder then that we have no record of privileges of protection and immunity granted to the nobility...:" Otto Brunner, *Land and Lordship* (Philadelphia, reprint 1992), p. 301.

[133] K.B. Pathak and K.N. Dikshit, "Poona Plates of the Vakataka Queen Prabhavati-Gupta: the 13th Year," *EI* XV (1925), p. 43, lines 18-19.

who besides the customary formulas, adds the following:

> And this condition of the charter should be maintained by the Brāhmaṇs and by (*future*) lords; namely (*the enjoyment of this grant is to belong to the Brāhmaṇs*) for the same time with the moon and the sun, provided that they commit no treason against the kingdom, consisting of seven constituent parts, of (*successive*) kings; that they are not slayers of Brāhmaṇs, and are not thieves, adulterers, poisoners of kings &c.; that they do not wage war; (*and*) that they do no wrong to other villages. But if they act otherwise, or assent (*to such acts*), the king will commit no theft in taking the land away.[134]

In both the quotations it is clear that the *brāhmaṇas* donees referred to did not have the capacity to exert violent coercion. They could not wield weapons, not even in self defence. In the latter case the donor had necessarily to be called upon for he was and remained the protector of the granted land. On the other hand, any activity, on the side of the *brāhmaṇas* donees which went against the security of the kingdom became *ipso facto* a valid reason for the donor to expropriate the donee. Unfortunately this kind of evidence is very rare in inscriptions. However it is conceivable that even where these kinds of conditions are not clearly laid out, they are nevertheless meant and implied. Land grants even if they constituted sorts of 'autonomous spaces' within a kingdom, were not so autonomous as to be independent from it.

Far from being means of the state's own demise, religious grants supported and extended the king's power. Religious donations were the extension and manifestation of the king's lordship, very much established on *dharma* and its derivative constructs, an ideology which the *brāhmaṇa* donees themselves embodied. The primacy of the king's authority and the interest those religious donees had in preserving and protecting it was thus embedded in the practice of land grants. Despite the losses of revenue that these grants entailed, they yielded an immediate political return. After all, the patronage that kings extended to religious recipients was nothing but 'ritualised actions', which allowed the king to tap into the power of the divine, then enhance his own sanctity, and, most important, demonstrate it to other lords.[135] Land grants to religious institutions became the clear manifestation and embodiment of the 'state system' of the early medieval North Indian kingdom.

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[134] J.F. Fleet, "Chammak Copper-plate Inscription of the Maharaja Pravarasena II," *CII* III (1888), p. 242, lines 39-43.
[135] Heitzman, *Gifts of Power...*, p. 1.

These last remarks allow us to make some further clarifications. The grants radicalised the king's power for the simple reason that a grant necessitated the king's protection and hence the loyalty of the donee. This in turn increased the king's political hold on the territory. In fact the greater the loyalty of both donees and lords towards the king, the greater his hold. We may indeed speculate that the grants to religious donees might have been a sort of political strategy by means of which the king was able to break up and control the political hold of the lords of particular territories. Grants created in fact areas of strong royal support. Perhaps counterintuitively, the longer the chain of encompassed lordships, the greater the loyalties to the king and hence, the stronger his political hold on the kingdom.

4.2 The early medieval North Indian state system

The expression 'state system' is used intentionally to qualify the early medieval North Indian polity and at the same time to distance it from any modern or contemporary notion of state. The hierarchical chain of political actors which linked the various local principalities into a coherent political system basically emerged from the agrarian structure and was reinforced by the kind of ideological constructs depicted in chapter three. The king and his court were at the top of the hierarchy but were also the encompassing reality in which the individual and local lordships found an expression and a dramatic re-enactment. Political action in our period was in fact channelled through ritual which was not necessarily always of a religious character. Paradoxically, while on the one hand, everything the king did was religious in character, on the other hand, it is equally true that nothing the king did was religious. In fact every action the king carried out had its parallel in the world of the gods: from the appointment of a ruler to the concession of a grant, to fighting a war to marrying a princess. This was so because kings were lords not only in parallel with the lordship of the gods but also in continuity with it, belonging to the same great chain of being. Thus the loyalty of lords towards their superiors was *bhakti* and *bhakti* linked the king to his chosen cosmic overlord. The relation of subordination between earthly lords was manifested through the language of 'head' and 'feet', the same one which characterised the relation between king and god. 'Religious' categories fashioned the early medieval Indian world and effectively constituted the political discourse right from its very inception.[136] From

[136] Daud Ali, personal communication.

Pāla inscriptions, for instance, it seems that the Pālas engaged primarily in four kinds of activities: wars, marriages, religious benefactions and artistic accomplishments. These in fact were both the ways in which the king related to his subjects and the kind of 'ritual actions' which literally built and articulated his kingdom. The king's military prowess qualified him as a *kṣatriya* and so did his artistic accomplishments, the two being the external and internal characteristics of his *kṣatriya* nature. Marriages and religious donations manifested his right and power to be king and constituted the chief means for the building up of alliances and loyalties. It is not accidental then that the bigger donations of the Pāla kings were granted to religious institutions in the first century of their rule.[137] These probably helped the establishment of the kingdom in its formative stage by buttressing royal power locally. Temples and monasteries came to be strongholds of royal support for the simple reason that their privileged juridical status depended totally on the king's authority. The fact that people made up fake royal charters[138] is but proof of the power which was attached to the king's deeds. It is not unknown in Indian history that land-grants simply fell into disuse and had to be re-issued.[139] And this could happen only because of the weakness of the king's power without which a religious grant, despite its embedded religious sanctity, could not survive. For the perpretators of fake grants, it was royal power which 'legitimised' religious institutions!

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[137] During more than four hundred years of Pāla rule in North-eastern India the total number of villages given away is eighteen, nineteen if we also include the town of Nandadīrghikā in Puṇḍravardhana (see Ramesh and Iyer, "Māldā District Museum Copper-plate Charter of Mahendrapāladeva, Year 7," *EI* XLII, pp. 6-29). To this number we could add the donations of parts of five villages recorded in five royal charters and the donation of three plots of land in another one. Paradoxically if we consider even those five parts of corresponding villages as full villages, a total of 24 villages were given away in four centuries, at an average rate of six villages every one hundred years. However, if we look at the pattern of donations an interesting picture emerges. Of the 24 villages, in fact, 16 were given away in the first period of Pāla rule, that is, from Dharmapāla to Śūrapāla I, circa 770-869 AD. A total of eight villages were then apportioned in the remaining three hundred years. Even admitting that the number of charters which have come down to us is but a minimal part of the total number of charters issued by the Pālas, the trend is nevertheless clear. Donations were bigger at the beginning of Pāla rule and gradually decreasing afterwards. After Śūrapāla I, no single Pāla king granted more than one village at a time. In the end kings were only donating parts of villages.

[138] R.S. Sharma, "Rajasasana: Meaning, Scope and Application," *Indian History Congress* (Proceedings of the 37th Session, Calicut, 1976), pp. 83-84.

[139] Some examples: king Bhāskaravarman in the 7th century had to re-issue a charter to a donee. The land object of the grant had previously been donated but was now under the requirements of 'taxation', since the charter had been lost: quoted in Nayanjot Lahiri, "Landholding and Peasantry in the Brahmaputra Valley: c. 5th-13th Centuries A. D.," *JESHO* 33 (1990), p. 159. Two Pratihāra charters, dated to 836 and 843 AD respectively, inform us that king Bhojadeva had to reconfirm the donations of two villages which had been granted by his forefathers but which had fallen into disuse; see Sastri, "Barah Copper-plate of Bhojadeva; Vikrama-Samvat 893," *EI* XIX, pp. 15-19; F. Kielhorn, "Daulatpura Plate of Bhojadeva I of Mahodaya; (Harsha-) Samvat 100," *EI* V (1898-99), pp. 208-13.

As far as the Pāla kings are concerned we lack a comprehensive picture of the religious network set up by them and specifically of the linkages between the royal court and the latter. Undoubtedly, however, the Pāla kings engaged heavily in religious patronage. Nālandā was for a long time the object of Pāla support. Apart from Dharmapāla and Devapāla's charters we have a number of epigraphs which refer to the continuous presence of Pāla patronage in the area.[140] Somapura *vihāra* in North Bengal was built by Dharmapāla himself. Judging from its remains the institution must have been a massive one. This might perhaps be a clue to its pre-eminent role in the polity. At the time of Rāmapāla (end of the 11th century) the same role may have been occupied by Jagaddala *mahāvihāra* in Varendra.[141] Other institutions are known from epigraphs and perhaps the most interesting of these refers to a big Śaiva establishment somewhere in North Bengal patronised by both Mahīpāla I (c. 979-1027 AD) and his son Nayapāla (c. 1027-1042 AD).[142] Although we do not know what links existed between all these institutions and the Pāla court, the urbanisation which seems to have taken place around these religious sites indicates that the latter were centres of economic exchange. We may then surmise that the strength of the Pāla 'state system' lay in the king's ability to mobilise resources and local authorities, religious or otherwise.

In this respect it is to be noticed that court officials and not the Pāla kings concerned themselves with the day to day running of the kingdom. Apparently a sort of ministerial council existed and was variously called 'council of the hereditary ministers' (*maul-āmātya-sabhā*)[143] or 'assembly of ministers' (*saciva-samāja*).[144] These people were in a way the king's long arms and through them the king ruled. This in fact is the impression we get from the eulogy of Guravamiśra's family. Allowing for the poetic

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[140] Bhattacharyya, "Nalanda Plate of Dharmapaladeva," *EI* XXIII, pp. 290-92; Hirananda Shastri, "The Nalanda Copper-plate of Devapaladeva," *EI* XVII, pp. 310-27. Of interest is the inscription of Vīradeva who is said to have occupied an important position in Nālandā because of Devapāla's patronage: F. Kielhorn, "A Buddhist Stone-Inscription from Ghosrawa," *IA* XVII (Nov. 1888), pp. 307-12. For a comprehensive view of epigraphic material from Nālandā see also Hirananda Shastri, *Nalanda and Its Epigraphic Material. Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India* 66 (Delhi, 1942).

[141] *Rāmacarita*, III.7B.

[142] D.C. Sircar, "Bāṇgaḍh Stone Inscription of the Time of Nayapāla," *Journal of Ancient Indian History* VII (1973-74), pp. 135-58. Notably, in 1024 AD, Mahīpāla is also known to have caused the restoration of some Buddhist sites in the area of Benares: E. Hultzsch, "The Sarnath Inscription of Mahipala," *IA* XIV (1885), pp. 139-40.

[143] D.C. Sircar, "Rajghat Inscription of Bhimadeva," *EI* XXXII (1957-58), p. 281, line 1. Here Madanapāla's *mahāsāndhivigrahika* Bhīmadeva's grandfather, a *mahāsāndhivigrahika* himself, is said to have belonged to the council.

[144] Venis, "Copper-plate Grant of Vaidyadeva, King of Kāmarūpa," *EI* II, p. 351, line 14. Here it is the same Vaidyadeva, former *saciva* of king Kumārapāla, who is said to have been part of the council.

licenses of the literary genre, it is clear that this family of hereditary ministers credited themselves for having made the Pālas great.[145] The king however was not a simple figure-head. Ministers and the like were his delegates and could not be thought of without him. They enhanced the king's power and fame. Additionally, early medieval legal literature makes it clear that 'the king's orders' (*rājasāsana*) had pre-eminence over any other form of legal binding.[146]

The expression which symbolises the relation of dependence of officials on the king is often compounded, as already remarked, with the word 'feet' (*pāda*). Some of these expressions as found in Gupta epigraphs have already been reproduced above. In Pāla inscriptions, the sections listing the titles of the Pāla officials always include the expression 'and the other dependants of the king's feet' (*ādi-rājapādopajīvino*)[147] which implies that all preceding and mentioned officials are equally dependant on the king's feet. What is more the same literary device is used to signify the relationship between kings of the same family. Thus the genealogical portions of Pāla inscriptions refer to the reigning king as him who 'meditates on the feet' of the preceding monarch (*pādānudhyātaḥ*).[148] Undoubtedly the expression qualified the hierarchical position of a person *vis à vis* his superior, but particularly in the latter use the same expression qualified that subjection in terms of loyalty and devotion.

Perhaps the best way to articulate the relationship between a king and his kingdom is the *saptāṅga* metaphor already mentioned in the previous chapter. The metaphor refers to a kingdom as to a body with 'seven limbs' (*saptāṅga*). The image is found in both the *Manusmṛti* and the *Arthaśāstra* although in the latter the word for 'limb', *aṅga*, is rendered with *avayava*, apparently with no changes in meaning.[149] Accordingly the limbs are the king (*svāmī* or *rāja*), the minister (*amātya*), the territory with its people (*janapada* or *rāṣṭra*), the fort (*durga*), the treasury (*kośa*), the army (*daṇḍa* or *balāni*) and the ally (*mitraṇi* or *suhṛta*). The relation among these constituent elements is such that "each [limb] is more important than the one which follows it."[150] The *Arthaśāstra* is even more specific saying that the king is the head among the

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[145] Kielhorn, "Badal Pillar Inscription of the Time of Narayanapala," *EI* II, pp. 160-67.
[146] References in Sharma, "Rajasasana: Meaning, Scope and Application," *Indian History Congress*, pp. 76-87.
[147] See for instance Kielhorn, "Khalimpur Plate of Dharmapaladeva," *EI* IV, p. 250, line 46.
[148] *Ibid.*, p. 249, line 29.
[149] *Arthaśāstra*, 8.1 quoted in Om Prakash, *Political Ideas in the Purāṇas* (Allahabad, 1977), p. 61. In *Arthaśāstra* 6.1.1 (R.P. Kangle tr., *The Kauṭilīya Arthaśāstra*, Bombay, 1963, p. 364) though, the term *prakṛti* stands for 'constituent element'.
[150] *Manu*, VIII.295.

limbs.[151] The word for head (*kūṭasthānīya*) however has also been rendered with 'spirit'. In that case the king would be that which enlivens the whole body of the kingdom.[152] This second meaning would be further supported by another statement according to which "the king and (his) rule (i.e. *rājya*), this is the sum total of the constituents."[153] King and kingdom are once again identified. Eventually the particular *aṅga* that the king is summates in himself all the others. Interestingly in a Rāṣṭrakūṭa inscription the following analogy is found:

> The soul (*ātmā*) is the king; the mind is his minister (*saciva*); the group of senses is again that circle of feudatories (*sāmantacakra*) according to the political science; and speech, &c., are the servants conforming to the prescribed rules. Presiding over his place (*dehasthānamadhiṣṭita*), namely, the body, he (the soul) is able to enjoy, independently his own *viṣaya*.[154]

The agency of the king is here completely transferred on to ministers and *sāmantas*. They are real political actors. It is obvious, however, that without the king they are nothing. In a meaningful way they are instruments to be enjoyed by the king and encompassed by his absolute eminence. The excellencies of a king mentioned in the previous chapter acquire in the light of this analogy a deeper meaning. They are in effect what makes him 'attractive' (*ābhigāmika guṇas*) to others. The king's self-mastery is the aloofness of the soul towards the senses and what keeps them both attached and subjugated.[155]

The *saptāṅga* image of a kingdom was complemented by another image: 'the circle of kings'.[156] In the *Nītisāra* the seven constituents are equated to a *maṇḍala* which in this context means a kingdom.[157] Without entering the discussion about the composition of a *maṇḍala*, it suffices here to say that enemy kings as well as friendly ones entered its definition.[158] The *mitra* or ally, one of the seven *aṅgas*, in the context of the *rājamaṇḍala*, included, in fact, the intervening *ari* or enemy. Paradoxically (to us) the *rājya* was a complex state system in which the existence of a paramount king did

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[151] *Arthaśāstra*, 8.1.18.
[152] Prakash, *Political Ideas in the Purāṇas*, p. 61.
[153] *Arthaśāstra*, 8.2.1.
[154] Bhandarkar, "Sanjan Plates of Amoghavarsha I: Saka-Samvat 793," *EI* XVIII, p. 255, verse 42.
[155] It is not accidental that in Kāmandaka's *Nītisāra* the opening section deals with the king's self restraint and is immediately followed by a disquisition on soul, mind and senses. See M.N. Dutt tr., *Kamandakiya Nitisara* (Calcutta, 1896), I,23-68.
[156] The idea is found of course in the *Artaśāstra* (6.1) as well as in a number of other texts (see below).
[157] *Nītisāra*, VIII.5.
[158] See section VIII of the *Nītisāra*.

not necessarily mean the exclusion or elimination of other lesser kings. The point is that in both the 'limbs' and 'circle' descriptions, the early medieval North Indian kingdom appears necessarily as a state system punctuated by semi-autonomous centres of authority brought into a flexible unity by a central court. Rather than a homogeneous 'territory' or 'state administration', the *rājya* consisted of a series of shifting relationships. Although more evident in the Gupta social formation, the same kind of state organisation also existed in the Pāla kingdom.

If we were to apply the *maṇḍala* framework to early medieval North and Central India we could even say, in very broad and general terms, that only one kingdom existed. This was the resultant of the continuous interaction through wars and marriages[159] of Pāla, Pratihāra and Rāṣṭrakūṭa kings, the three main dynasties which vied for supremacy from the 8th to the 11th centuries. Inden would certainly call such a kingdom an 'imperial formation', a scale of encompassing and encompassed lordships, the manifestation of one great chain of being.[160]

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[159] The Pālas entered in marriage relationships with several important dynasties. For example: Deddadevī was the daughter of the Bhadra king and wife of Gopāla I (Khalimpur plate, *EI* IV, p. 251, verse 5); Raṇṇādevī, the wife of Dharmapāla, was a daughter of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa Parabala (Mungir plate, *IA* XXI, p. 258, line 14); Māhaṭā, the wife of Devapāla, was the daughter of the Chāhamāna king Durlabha (Malda plate, *EI* XLII, p. 25, verse 11); Lajjā was the wife of Vigrahapāla I and the ornament of the Haihayas (Bhagalpur plate, *IA* XV, p. 308, verse 9); Bhāgyadevī, the daughter of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa Tuṅga was the wife of Rājyapāla (Bangarh plate, *EI* XIV, p. 329, verse 8); Vigrahapāla III married Yauvanaśrī, daughter of the Kalachuri Karṇa (*Rāmacarita*, I.9B); Mahana, the right hand of Rāmapāla in the fight against the Kaivarta, was his maternal uncle and a Rāṣṭrakūṭa himself. These are however only the relations we know of. Since kings had more than one wife, it is safe to presume that the quantity and quality of political networks they created through marriages, were far more complex.

[160] Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford, 1990), p. 214.

Conclusion

Colonialism and nationalism, the offspring of capitalist modernity, have often been the lens through which historians have looked at early medieval Indian reality. This resulted in a distorted vision which forwarded a comprehension of the kingdoms of early medieval India using categories extraneous to pre-capitalist social formations. The opposition between civil society and the state, functional to a modern polity, was read into early medieval social formations with the obvious result of totally misrepresenting the political processes. The Indian kingdoms came to be construed as more or less perfect anticipations of their capitalist models and negated in their own logic and rationale. Indian history was represented, particularly by early historians, as a series of failed or imperfect 'states'.

This dissertation has attempted to look at early medieval India through a different lens, a lens which early medieval Indians perhaps would have felt more comfortable with. The basic presupposition which has guided this study has been the belief that social formations which lasted for centuries must have had their own internal logic and order, no matter how different that may have been from modern and contemporary rationalities. A rereading of available sources, particularly epigraphic, found a striking dominance in them of so called 'religious' categories. The dissertation, however, has argued that these categories were not 'religious' in today's sense. They instead were part of a 'science' which fashioned every aspect of the early medieval world. Politics and economy cannot but be looked for in this 'science'. The state, far from being an institution presiding over and differentiated from 'civil society', was the totality of a social formation.

This dissertation has contended that lordship was the essential category of that 'science' which constituted the world-ordering rationality of early medieval India. Informed by cosmic and theological considerations, lordship was at the same time a religious, political and economic category capable as such of both safeguarding and interpreting the unitary 'religious' perspective of early medieval sources and the world which produced them. Indeed, lordship not only organised that world but, more precisely, constituted it. Lordship was the very structure and matter the entire universe was made of. The chain of incorporated lordships which constituted the Indian universe was in fact a chain of being where superior domains encompassed inferior ones. The

earthly kingdom was but a 'section' of that chain reproducing, by way of homology, the patterns of the wider cosmos.

Consequently, the dissertation has argued that the early medieval Indian state embodied a notion of politics far wider in scope than any modern notion. Modern capitalist and political systems implicitly rely on a compartmentalisation of human knowledge and agency in which politics defines and is limited by a specific domain. At most, domains like religion may assume an incidental or instrumental political significance but they remain nevertheless detached from the realm proper of the political. This was not the case in early medieval India. We may not conceive of religion as having a political meaning or representing or being instrumental to the political. It instead *was* the political. *Dharma*, the horizon of early medieval Indian kingdoms, was indeed an ideology, but unlike ideology in capitalist formations, it constituted reality without representing it as something else. For the same reasons, the medieval notion of state is not equivalent to the modern notion of politics: its sphere of activity was far greater. In pre-capitalist times, politics coincides not with the state but, to say the least, with polity and social formation.

The dissertation however has not merely replaced one rationality with another; a capitalist model of state with an Indian one. History is not the battlefield of rationalities but of real human beings. The state, in whatever form, is in fact the realisation of real people living in concrete situations. In early medieval North India, a particular mode of production organised human relations at all levels. This dissertation, has argued that lordship constituted the organising principle of this mode of production. Communal life developed within the space defined by lordship. A particular notion of ownership informed agrarian relations and at the same time was the basis for political relations of subordination. A religious ideology, from within the system, enforced the actual relations of power among people and facilitated the coherence of a social formation which was established as much by force as it was by consensus. The point here is that the early medieval Indian kingdom was established on the basis of particular agrarian relations of production. In the Pāla kingdom, these relations placed the king as the lord of the earth at the top of the hierarchy of encompassing and encompassed lordships, while the *kṣettrakaras* or peasants were at the bottom. Various landlords and landowners occupied the intermediate positions. Landed property organised the relationships, always dialectic and negotiable, between dispersed local powers and the central Pāla court. From the Gupta period onwards, what characterised

the political processes of early medieval North Indian polities was the progressive integration of territorial potentates into central royal courts. During the early medieval Indian period, the increasing economic value of land together with the social prestige attached to it, catalysed the above mentioned process of political integration. This has also helped explain the stronger political hold the Pāla kings exerted on their domains.

Administrative organisation in early medieval kingdoms hardly existed by modern standards. In fact the basis of political organisation was not a uniform bureaucratic machine but actual relations of personal affiliation (loyalty and devotion) which linked the lordships of lesser rulers to that of a paramount sovereign. In any kingdom, several and differentiated political agents and agencies coexisted. Thus in the Gupta period we find *adhikaraṇas*, guilds and *mahārājas* of various sorts all paying homage to the Gupta monarch. These were part and parcel of the same hierarchic chain of incorporated lordships. Loyalty entailed political and military support when needed and, in all likelihood, the payment of some sort of tribute. However in Pāla times, this diversity of agencies disappeared. This was not due to changes in political and ideological practices but to structural changes in the economic fabric of society. A diminished circulation of pecuniary wealth and a consequent increase in the value of land explains the more uniform political organisation of Pāla India.

Be it as it may, the early medieval Indian kingdom was not a structure which 'hung over' the landowners and peasantry. No intermediate class was interposed between the ruler and the ruled for the simple reason that in actual practice peasants of most of the territories were subjected to their respective lords, who in turn dealt with the king. Generally speaking, revenue was paid to landlords who then contributed to the kingdom's finances. Only a fraction of a kingdom's total peasant population paid directly to the paramount king. Landlords and the various religious donees were thus not the instruments of the state's demise or the intermediaries of royal power but were the manifestation of the state system represented as both *rājamaṇḍala* (circle of kings) and *saptāṅga* (seven limbs). Furthermore, the dissertation has contended that the longer the chain of lords the stronger the political hold the Pālas actuated in their kingdom.

Buddhist monasteries, Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava institutions, donees of various sorts and territorial lords also made up the Pāla state. Each one of these agencies was a nodal point in a network of religious, political and economic relationships. Without them the Pāla kingdom could not exist. Unfortunately, the scarcity of sources has not allowed a

clear analysis of the dynamics and modalities of such a network. The least we can say is that the Pālas were its organising and central node. Loyalties were continually renegotiated. Wars, marriages and donations were the chief means for building up new allegiances and hence for the regeneration of the polity. The relationships between Buddhist and 'Hindu' institutions, as well as between Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava institutions themselves were not necessarily always of a peaceful nature. But how these conflictual relationships worked out in practice remains unknown. We can be sure of one thing, however, such a state system was far from static and unchangeable.

Whether this 'state system' can be effectively labelled 'feudal' has not been the concern of the dissertation. This term has often been wrongly used to indicate a political process of fragmentation which is both preceded and followed by the emergence of superior, centralised polities. What is more, the term also reflects the kind of capitalist political rationality this dissertation has challenged. Devised as a counter-image by both the absolutist state and the civil society which emerged from the French revolution, feudalism has become a convenient cover for whatever one does not understand or like of the so called Middle Age.[1]

The dissertation thus does not pretend to have exhausted the topic. In this respect, the study has to be seen as merely introductory and providing a framework for further research. A fruitful development can be expected pursuing three different but related lines of enquiry which the dissertation has only touched upon. The first concerns a deeper study of the notion of lordship against the background of the cosmic kind of lordship exercised by the great gods. The second line of enquiry focuses on the interrelationships between Hinduism and Buddhism in the articulation of the idea of 'universal rule'. Finally, further research is required on the question of periodising Indian history.

First, the paramount sovereignty of the earthly king was but a reflection of the cosmic sovereignty of the two great gods, Viṣṇu and Śiva. Viṣṇu in particular came to dominate the horizon of early medieval Indian polities as both the highest form of encompassing lordship and the sum total of every single incorporated ones. He was in fact the highest entity in the medieval chain of beings as well as the totality of being itself. The dissertation has not fully developed this argument which is nonetheless critical to understanding the notion of lordship. In the case of the Pāla kings this need is

[1] See Otto Brunner, *Land and Lordship* (Philadelphia, 1st edition 1939, translated from the 1965 4th revised edition, 1992), p. 93.

even more compelling for they were in fact the last major Buddhist dynasty of continental India. Why is it then that the Pālas relied as much as other contemporary 'Hindu' dynasties on *purāṇic* and theist discourses to build up their kingdom? The question is all the more pertinent if we consider, as this dissertation has done, the unitary world view of the early medieval Indian period. Religion was not a-political and politics was not secularised. The Buddhist religion of the Pāla kings must have played a role in the articulation of the polity, perhaps differentiating it from other contemporary ones.

Second, the idea of 'universal rule' was born as a Buddhist one and the Mauryas first put it into practice in their imperial structure. Apparently and for reasons yet to be fully established, Mauryan Buddhism flourished in urban contexts and thrived among mercantile classes. The complex archaeological evidence bearing on early medieval Indian urbanisation may thus be related to structural and economic changes which occurred in the period and which in turn modified religious belonging and identities. Gupta sources, for instance, seem to refer more to an urban economy while Pāla ones are more rooted in an agrarian context. How far these changes provoked a restructuring of political and religious organisation is however far from clear. Thus even if the Guptas' religious affiliation remains unclear, is it possible that their political practices were fundamentally Buddhist? Could the Guptas not be the dynasty which lived and passed through these economic changes and engendered the kind of political and religious developments found fully established in the organisations of later dynasties? If this were found to be true, we would then have a supposedly 'Hindu' dynasty, the Guptas, embodying a Buddhist form of social formation; and conversely, a Buddhist one, the Pālas, fashioning a 'Hindu' polity. The whole point eventually revolves around the relationship between Buddhism and historical Hinduism. The latter, I believe, was a product of the early medieval period and was itself constituted in structural and oppositional relation to the hegemony of the Buddhist discourse.

The answers to these questions can only be found by considering values and practices in their pre-modern context. Thus, for example, it would be a futile exercise to distinguish between the private religion of the Pāla kings (i.e. Buddhism) and the public religion of their state (i.e. Hinduism). A more fruitful approach would entail considering the very nature of religion in those days. Unlike modern practice, religions were never clearly defined dogmatically or ritually, rather the boundaries between one and the other were porous and shifting. Thus, Śūrapāla's court poet does not find it

contradictory to praise Dharmapāla as the protector of 'the true *dharma*' (i.e. Buddhism), of 'the *dharma* of the enemy of Khara' (i.e. Rāma), of 'the *dharma* of Śambhu' (i.e. Śiva) and of 'the *dharma* of Murāri' (i.e. Viṣṇu).[2] This line of enquiry distances itself from abstract notions of religion as defined in sacred texts. Religion, Hindu or Buddhist, was what early medieval Indians lived and experienced, irrespective of how far this may be from the kind of knowledge we have gained from the study of their respective sacred literatures. In this context, more detailed survey and analysis of archaeological sites are required, for they often hold the key to a greater understanding of historical practices and transformations. It is possible that the differences both in ideology and practice found in the Gupta and Pāla polities respectively, may turn out to refer to notions of lordship with a more or less differential Buddhist or 'Hindu' content.

The third and last point which the dissertation has not comprehensively addressed but which nevertheless deserves attention is the question of periodisation. The present study has consistently and constantly referred to the early medieval period as to the time comprising the Guptas and ending with the Pālas, approximately from the 4th to the 13th centuries. While the dissertation offers enough ground to justify speaking of this temporal category, it does not relate this to the wider historical framework. So, how to situate the early medieval period within the wider context of Indian history? How to differentiate it from periods which preceded and followed it? This question ultimately concerns the justifiability of the historiographical convention of using the category 'early medieval' itself. From a strictly terminological perspective and in line with this dissertation, it may be questionable whether the term 'medieval' itself is appropriate for the period comprising the 4th to the 13th centuries. Middle age in fact designates, in traditional historical parlance, a period between the ancient and the modern, generally characterised by decadence! This invites the study of social formations which ushered in and followed the early medieval Indian period. Since the conception of a centralised Mauryan state has been conclusively dismissed by recent studies, a reformulation of the relationships between ancient and early medieval must, at least, go beyond the opposition between centralisation and decentralisation.

Whatever future research may establish or find, from this dissertation it is apparent that any study of pre-modern social formations, Indian or otherwise, must take into consideration and come to terms with modern and contemporary categories.

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[2] D.C. Sircar, "Lucknow Museum Copper-plate Inscription of Surapala I, Regnal Year 3," *Epigraphia Indica* (*EI*) XL (1973), p. 11, lines 13-14.

The historian's attitude to the ideology and practices of modern states will eventually determine his/her views of pre-modern polities. Well aware of this, we may finally conclude with Otto Brunner's words. Written in reference to the Austrian and generally European Middle Age, they rightfully and equally apply to the early medieval Indian period.

> It is impossible to describe medieval structures of order with the categories of 19th century social and economic history, or in sociological terms oriented to the 19th century's concept of "society," or according to the positivist concept of public law corresponding to this sociology.[3]

[3] Otto Brunner, *Land and Lordship*, p. 364.

Appendix 1

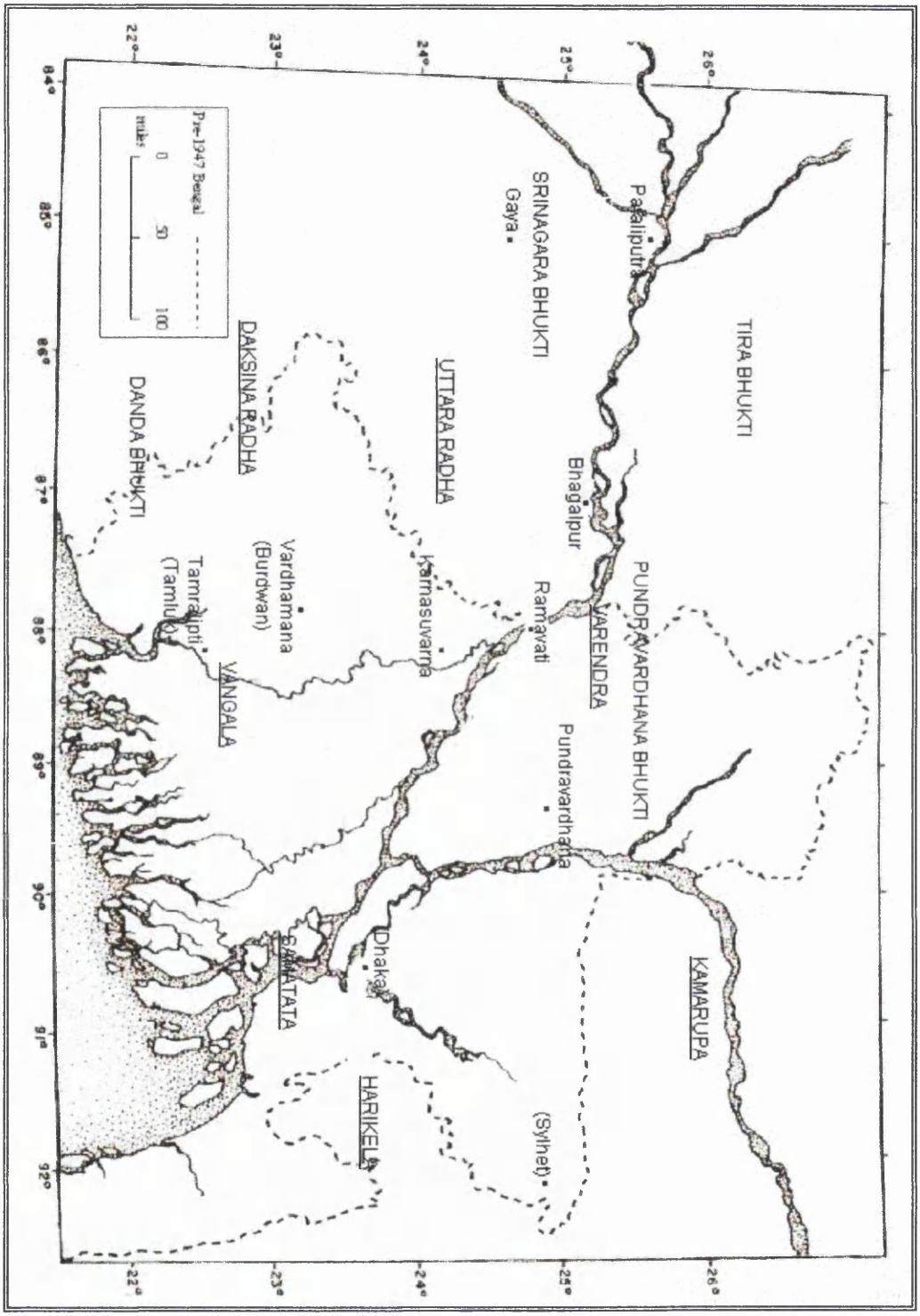
The Pāla Kings of Bengal and Bihar

King's Name	Relation to Preceding Dynast	Known Reign in Years	Approximate Reigning Period
Gopāla I	founder	(?)	750-770 AD
Dharmapāla	son	32	770-810 AD
Devapāla	son	39	810-849 AD
Mahendrapāla	son	15	849-864 AD
Śūrapāla I	brother	5	864-869 AD
Vigrahapāla I	second cousin	(?)	869-?
Nārāyaṇapāla	son	54	870-924 AD
Rājyapāla	son	32	924-956 AD
Gopāla II	son	15	956-971 AD
Vigrahapāla II	son	(?)	971-?
Mahīpāla I	son	48	979-1027 AD
Nayapāla	son	15	1027-1042 AD
Vigrahapāla III	son	26	1042-1068 AD
Mahīpāla II	son	(?)	1068-?
Śūrapāla II	brother	(?)	?-1073
Rāmapāla	brother	53	1073-1127 AD
Kumārapāla	son	(?)	1127-1129 AD
Gopāla III	son	15	1129-1144 AD
Madanapāla	uncle (i.e. Rāmapāla's son)	18	1144-1162 AD
Govindapāla	?	(?)	1162-?

* This table has been re-worked from Jhunu Bagchi, *The History and Culture of the Pālas of Bengal and Bihar* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1993), pp. 8-29, on the basis of epigraphic data.

Appendix 2

Early Medieval North-eastern India



* The map has been elaborated from maps published in both Richard M. Eaton *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) and R.C. Majumdar, *History of Bengal* (Dacca: Dacca University, 1943).

Appendix 3

India's Ancient Territorial Subdivisions

* This map has been elaborated from the one published as an attachment to D.C. Sircar, *Studies in the Geography of Ancient and Medieval India* (Delhi, 2nd edition 1971).

Appendix 4

The Royal Charters of the Pāla Kings

Copper Plate	Issued by	Demanded by	Donee	Grant	Relative Date	Absolute Date	Reference
Khalimpur	Dharmapāla	*Mahāsāmantādhipati* Nārāyaṇavarman	The temple of Nanmanārāyaṇa and its *Lāṭa Brāhmaṇas*	Four villages in the Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*	From Pāṭaliputra in the 32nd year	circa 802 AD	*EI*, IV, p. 243ff
Nalanda	Dharmapāla	?	?	A village in the Nagara *bhukti*	From Kapilā (?)	Beginning of 9th century	*EI*, XXIII, p. 290ff
Monghyr	Devapāla		The *bhaṭṭa* Vīrekāraṭamiśra	A village in the Śrīnagara *bhukti*	From Mudgagiri in the 33rd year	circa 843 AD	*IA*, XXI, p. 253ff; EI, XVIII, p. 304ff
Nalanda	Devapāla	Bālaputradeva ruler of Suvarṇadvīpa	A Buddhist monastery in Nālandā	Five villages in the Śrīnagara *bhukti*	From Mudgagiri in the 39th year	circa 849 AD	*EI*, XVII, p. 310ff
Malda	Mahendrapāla		The Buddhist monastery in Nandadīrghikā, Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*	The same town of Nandadīrghikā	From Auddālakhāṭaka in the 7th year	circa 856 AD	*EI*, XLII, p. 6ff
Mirzapur	Śūrapāla I	Śūrapāla's mother, *Mahādevī* Mahaṭādevī	The god Māhaṭeśvara in Vārāṇasī and its Śaiva *ācāryas*	Four villages in the Śrīnagara *bhukti*	From Mudgagiri in the 3rd year	circa 867 AD	*EI*, XL, p. 4ff
Bhagalpur	Nārāyaṇapāla		The temple of Śiva in Kalaśapata and its Pāupata teachers	A village in Tūra *bhukti*	From Mudgagiri in the 17th year	End of 9th century	*IA*, XV, p. 304ff

Copper Plate	Issued by	Demanded by	Donee	Grant	Relative Date	Absolute Date	Reference
Bhaturiya*	Rājyapāla	The *tantrādhikārin* Yaśodāsa	The god Vrishabhadhvaja (Śiva)	A village supposedly in Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*	?	First half of 10th century	*EI*, XXXIII, p. 150ff
Jajilpara	Gopāla II		The *Brāhmachārin* Śridhara Śarmā	Parts of a village in Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*	From Baṭaparvvatikā in the 6th year	Third quarter of 10th century	*JRASB*, XVII, p. 137ff
Belwa	Mahīpāla I		The *Brāhmaṇa* Jīvadharadeva Śarman	Three plots in Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*	From Sāhasagaṇḍa in the 5th year	Last quarter of 10th century	*EI*, XXIX, p. 1ff
Bangarh	Mahīpāla I		The *Brāhmaṇa* Kṛṣṇāditya	Parts of a village in Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*	From Vilāsapura in the 9th year	Last quarter of 10th century	*EI*, XIV, p. 324ff
Belwa	Vigrahapāla III		The *Brāhmaṇa* Jayānandadeva Śarman	Parts of a village in Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*	From Vilāsapura in the 11th year	Second half of 11th century	*EI*, XXIX, p. 9ff
Amgacchi	Vigrahapāla III		The *Brāhmaṇa* Khoḍuladeva Śarman	Parts of two villages in Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*	From Haradhāna in the 12th year	Second half of 11th century	*EI*, XV, p. 293ff
Bangaon	Vigrahapāla III	The *vidheya* Ghāṇḍśa	The *Brāhmaṇa* Ghāṇḍika Śarman	Part of a village in Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*	From Kāñchanapura in the 17th year	Second half of 11th century	*EI*, XXIX, p. 48ff
Manahali	Madanapāla	The queen, the *Paṭṭamahādevī* Citramatikā	The *Brāhmaṇa* Vaṭśvarasvāmin Śarman	A village in Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*	From Rāmāvatī in the 8th year	circa 1152 AD	*JASB*, LXIX, p. 66ff

* Stone Inscription.

EI = Epigraphia Indica; IA = Indian Antiquary; JASB = Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal; JRASB = Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal.

Essential Glossary

Some of the following Sanskrit words and expressions are found in the text with alternative spellings. The Sanskrit of the inscriptions often reflects linguistic forms which are standard in one area but not in another.

adharmic	that which goes against *dharma*
adhiṣṭānādhikaraṇa	local governing body of a city
adhikāra	right, entitlement
adhikāris	bearer of *adhikāra*
adhikaraṇa	local governing body
adhipati	chief
agrahāra	rent-free village
akṣaya	indestructible, permanent
akṣpaṭalādhikṛta	record keeper
alakṣmīka	not leading to prosperity
amātya	minister
anugraha	grace
aṅga	limb
aprada	of land not yet alienated
aprahata	of land untilled
arājaka	both a kingdom without a king and a kingdom with an unworthy king
ari	enemy
artha	economics
asat	untrue
avanipāla	protector of the earth, king
ābhigāmika	that which is attractive
ācāra	custom
āḍhavāpa	unit of land measurement
āgrahārika	superintendent of *agrahāras*
āpaddharma	rules for exceptional situations
āsanam	throne, seat
āśraya	refuge
ātmā	soul
āyuktaka	'executive officer'
bala	force, army
bhakti	the act of sharing in, devotion
bharaṇa	bearing
bhartṛ	master, lord, husband
bhaumika	landholder
bhoga	periodical offerings to the king; unit of territorial lordship
bhogapati	lord of enjoyment, head of a unit of territorial lordship
bhogika	somebody enjoying a *bhoga*, a governor
bhuj	to enjoy
bhukti	enjoyment, a unit of territorial lordship
bhāṭa	policemen, watchmen, peons
bhūbhṛta	supporter of the earth/land, king

bhūbharaṇa	maintaining the earth
bhūbhojana	the enjoyment of the earth/land
bhāga	the king's grain share
bhūmiśvara	lord of the land, king
bhūmicchidra	referring to land tenures as free from revenue demands
bhūpāla	maintainer, protector of the land/earth, king
bhūpa	maintainer, protector of the land/earth, king
bhūpati	lord of the land, king
bhṛtya	servant, he who needs support
brahman	constitutive element of *brāhmaṇas*
brāhmaṇa	highest of the four estates, the priests
cāṭa	head of a group of *bhāṭas*
daṇḍa	rod of power, violence, coercive force
dakṣiṇā	fee to be paid to a *brāhmaṇa* in exchange for a ritual service
darbar	imperial gathering
dharma	cosmo-moral order, religion, law, justice
dharmaśāstra	class of legal, ritual, scientific literature
dharmaśāstric	of or relating to *dharmaśāstras*
dikpālas	guardians, protectors of the worlds/directions
droṇavāpa	unit of land measurement
durga	fort
dūtaka	land charter executive
dvija	twice born, relating to the three higher estates
ḍāmara	Kashmiri landlord
garta	hole
gaulmika	superintendent of forests and woods
gomārga	cattle path
gopatha	cattle path
goptṛ	herdsman, king
govata	cattle path
grāmāṣṭakulādhikaraṇa	a village governing body originally made up of eight people or family heads
grāma	village
grāmapati	village head
grāmika	village head
guṇa	attribute, quality, that which everything is made of
hala	*jāgīr*, land estate
haṭṭa	market
haṭṭikā	of or relating to market
hiraṇya	gold, cash
jana	people, subjects of the king
janapada	one of the limbs of the state, people and territory
jāgīr	land estate
jāti	caste as the historical realisation of *varṇa*
kara	tax
kavirāja	king of poets
kāruka	artisan
khila	waste, uncultivated
kośa	the treasury

kṣatra	power, force, constitutive element of *kṣatriyas*
kṣatriya	second highest estate, the warriors and rulers
kṣettra	land, field
kṣettrakara	peasant
kṣitipati	lord of the earth, king
kulaputra	nobleman
kulasthiti	family tradition
kulyavāpa	unit of land measurement
kumārāmātya	princely minister
kuṭumbika	agriculturist, householder
kuṭumbin	agriculturist, householder
lokapālas	guardians, protectors of the worlds/directions
mahattama	greatest man, householder of means with leadership functions
mahattara	greater man, householder of means with leadership functions
mahā	great
mahābalādhikṛta	somebody in charge of armed forces
mahākṣapaṭalika	great minister in charge of records
mahākṣatrapa	great ruler
mahāmaṇḍalika	great chief of a *maṇḍala*
mahāpīlūpati	somebody in charge of elephants
mahāpratīhāra	great guardian of the court's gates
mahārājādhirāja	great king of kings
mahārāja	great king
mahāsāmantādhipati	great chief of the *sāmantas*, the bordering lords
mahāsāmanta	great bordering lord, great feudatory
mahāsāndhivigrahika	great minister for peace and war
mahāsenāpati	great chief of armed forces
mahāvihāra	great monastery (Buddhist)
mantra	counsel
mantri-kumārāmātya	a princely minister
mantrin	minister
maṇḍalādhipati	chief of a *maṇḍala*
maṇḍala	unit of territorial lordship; circle
mātsya	fish
mātsyanyāya	the law of the fish, of a kingdom where the caste system is tottering
mitra	friend
nagara	city, town
nagara-śreṣṭhin	the best of the city dwellers, head of the city, head of the merchant guild
nikara	sort of fixed fee in the context of land grants
nīvī	fixed capital
nṛpa	protector of men, king
nṛpati	protector of men, king
nyāya	law, rule, principle
paramabhaṭṭāraka	greatest venerable (imperial title)
paramamāheśvara	greatest devotee of Śiva (imperial title)
paramavaiṣṇava	greatest devotee of Viṣṇu (imperial title)
parihāra	privilege

pati	master, lord, husband
pādānuddhyātasya	meditating on the feet (of the king)
pāda	feet
pālana	sustenance, guidance
pātra	regulation, paper, list
praśasti	eulogy, poetic genre
prabhu	lord
prajā	people, subjects of the king
prakṛti	people, element
prathama kāyastha	chief scribe
pratyāya	income
pratyaya	subordination
pṛthivī	the earth, the goddess earth
pṛthivīpati	lord of the earth, king
purāṇa	class of historical literature; monetary unit
purāṇic	of or relating to the *purāṇas*
pustapāla	record keeper
rājā	king
raṣṭra	country, kingdom
rakṣaṇa	protection
rājadharma	the dharma of the king
rājamaṇḍala	the circle of kings
rājapuruṣa	the king's man, officer
rājaputra	son of king, minister
rājasāsana	the king's order or command or law
rājasthānīyoparika	*uparika* in the place of the king, governor of a *bhukti*
rājnīti	politics
rājya	kingdom
saciva	minister
saṅgha	Buddhist community, monastery
sapatnyā	co-wife
saptāṅga	seven limbs, the theory of state
sat	true
sāmanta	bordering lord, feudatory
sāmantacakra	circle of bordering lords, feudatories
sāndhivigrahika	officer in charge of peace and war
senāpati	head of armed forces
smṛti	class of texts distinct from the Vedas, their interpretative tradition
sugata	the Buddha
svatva	ownership
svāmī	lord, husband, king
svātantrya	independence
śakti	energy, strength, force
śaulkika	collector of *śulka*, tolls and customs duties
śāstras	scriptures, usually referring to *dharmaśāstras*
śāstric	of or relating to *dharmaśāstras*
śreṣṭhin	merchant
śrotriya	of *brāhmaṇas* adept to and living on the study of the Vedas
śūdra	lowest of the four estates or castes, the servants

śvāmin	master, lord, husband
ṣaṣṭhādhikṛta	revenue collector, superintendent of the sixth
tantra	class of literature
tantrādhikārin	officer in charge of 'administration'
tarika	collector of revenue at the crossing of rivers
tatpādaparigṛhītasya	favoured by his feet (of a subordinate of the king)
upabhoga	enjoyment
uparika	governor of a bhukti; extra tax
uparikamahārāja	great king in charge of a territorial unit of lordship, his governor
uṣara	barren
utsāha	valour, courage
vaiśya	lowest of the twice born, higher than *śūdras*
varṇāśramadharma	the duties and stages of life of each estate or caste
varṇa	colour; caste, estate
varṇadharma	the caste system
varṇasaṃkara	intermixture of castes
vartta	economics
vasundharapati	master of the earth, king
vāstu	habitable land, homestead
viṣṭi	forced labour
viṣaya	influence, district, unit of territorial lordship
viṣayapati	lord of a *viṣaya*
vidheya	servant, friend, adviser
vihāra	Buddhist monastery
viṃśati	section (of a book)
viplava	revolution, rebellion
vīthī	unit of territorial lordship
vyavahāra	custom
yuvarāja	designated heir to the throne

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